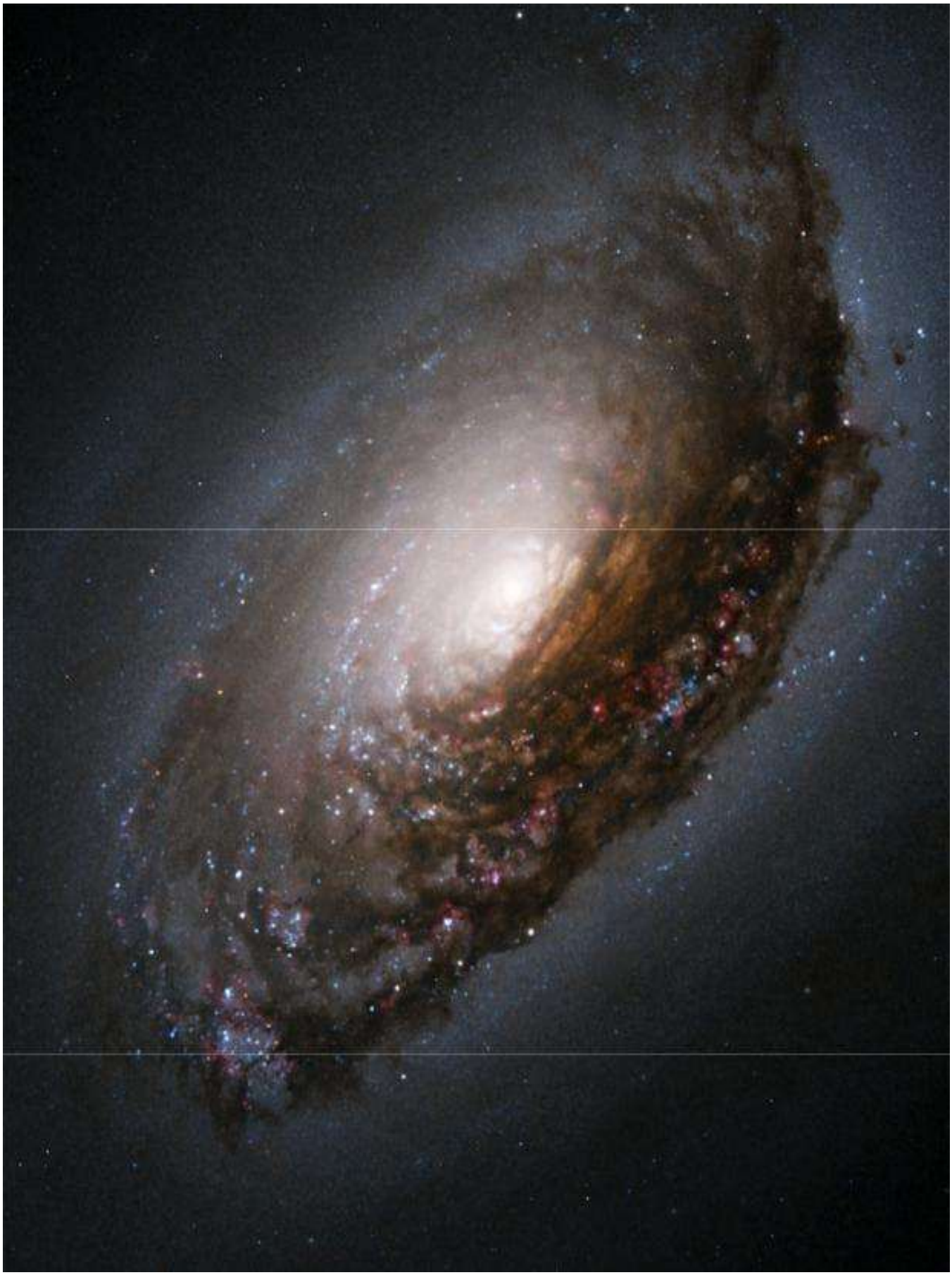

Disturb the Universe: The Collected Essays of Adam Fieled

Adam Fieled

Argotist Ebooks

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Century XX after *Four Quartets*

(2010)

With the remnants of the twentieth century still surrounding us, it may pay dividends, as the twenty-first century takes off, to take stock of these remnants and begin to make judgments. Newly ended centuries tend to leave detritus; this can create a hostile environment for artists who wish to sew new seeds and blaze new trails. Few seem to remember that when **Wordsworth** and **Coleridge** put out *Lyrical Ballads* (though the release and dissemination of this pivotal text spanned the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century), it received hostile reviews and a good amount of indifference, as well. With hindsight, we realize that this was the text that almost single-handedly initiated British Romanticism. The early twentieth century was also inconclusive; **William Butler Yeats** was only beginning to receive the recognition that would lead to laurel, Walt Whitman's poems were yet to receive the blessings of posterity, while a host of lesser lights congregated around minor poets or reveled in the just-dimming glow of Decadence and Aestheticism. What do we see around us in 2010? It is a poetry world stumbling for direction, still largely lost in the theoretical wilderness of post-modernism, which espouses, among other things, the notion that distinctions between high and low art are both superfluous and illusory, that high art is the imaginary creation of hegemonic white males, and that artists can safely toss history in the dustbin and create out of momentary impulses, that have a better chance of capturing authentic effects than the backwards/forwards time-warp effect that Modernists like **Eliot** and Pound thought efficacious.

I would like to argue, firstly, that the demarcations between high and low art need to be reinstated. My reasons for this are manifold, but the simplest is this: I do not believe that much English language poetry composed after 1943, the year that Eliot's *Four Quartets* were released, deserves the title of high art. Before I explain why the twentieth century, post *Four Quartets*, was mostly a washout for English language poetry, let me explain what distinctions I believe subsist between high and low art. High art is defined by a sense of aesthetic balance; a host of factors must be present and accounted for; technical competence is a necessity, breadth of vision (so that any narrowness of focus is soon dissipated into fusions with larger wholes), narrative solidity (even when, as in *Four Quartets*, it is a loosely woven narrative, that makes frequent subtle shifts in different directions), and, most importantly, continued serious engagement with serious themes. If this harkens back to **Matthew Arnold's** emphasis on truth and seriousness, and if this seems regressive, remember that, in poetry, the impulses of post-modernism have all but flushed these constituent elements. Low art impulses often maintain a stance that technical competence is unnecessary, that breadth of vision is too ambitious, that narrative solidity is a remnant of the nineteenth century (and, to the extent that Yeats and Eliot, the only two twentieth century high art poets in the English language, had strong nineteenth century affiliations, this may be the case), and that "seriousness" is an outdated and outmoded concern. So that, the notions of high art and low art have been both displaced and misplaced, with disastrous results. We are surrounded by detritus that attempts too much with too little; that encompasses not worlds but narrow grooves; that shies away from responsible, serious engagements, or courts these engagements with such brow-beating incompetence that the matters were better left alone; and that uses sly evasions to explain its own horrendous deficits.

Back to T. S . Eliot; what is it that makes *Four Quartets* high art, and almost everything that followed in the twentieth century dross? *Four Quartets*, however sententiously, starts from a high ground; the artist is coming to grips with the limitations of living in space and time. Eliot flattens space and time out in the context of an investigation of four places, each with its own peculiar resonances, which birth separate and discrete impulses in the poet, resulting in slight shifts in perspective and emphasis. *Four Quartets* is useful, also, because it demonstrates the loosest narrative emphasis possible in a poem that attempts to achieve

and maintain the durability and permanence traces of high art. Narrative is the backbone of serious poetry; *Four Quartets* has an "I" that dictates terms, but in such a way that "I" is not an obtrusive presence. If there is an imbalance in *Four Quartets*, it is or may be a sense of oscillating perspectives that leads to a less than unitary presentation, or a loose sense of coherence that sometimes meanders away from central points. However, there is a sense that this is redeemed by a spirit of inquiry that balances philosophical concerns with concrete details, fragments of colloquial speech with natural imagery, traces of humanity's past with visions of possible human futures. That *Four Quartets* spans all this ground does not, in and of itself, make it high art; but that Eliot's language is taut, sinewy, disciplined, and rich makes the whole of Four Quartets ring as a solid, major work of high literary art. If another such work exists that was released between 1943 and 2000, I haven't seen it.

The Objectivists, the Beats, the New York School (first and second generation), the Confessional poets—what do these poets lack, so that the appellation high art does not affix to their work, nor the appellation high artist affix to them? For many of these poets, it is the ragged lack of discipline in the language of their poems themselves. Trying to read Beat poetry is like trying to eat raw slabs of uncooked red meat. Thematically, the Beats might have been redeemed by an egalitarianism that harkened back to Whitman; formally, they were creators of tremendous Babels that are even now beginning to collapse. The Objectivists did have ambitions consonant with the approach of high artists—but their panoramic viewpoints were undermined by impoverished lines that displayed little heft, music, and which demonstrate, rather than the rawness of uncooked red meat, an overwhelming brittle dryness. The New York School poets evinced significantly more delicacy, thematically and formally, than the Objectivists and the Beats; however, the primary perpetuators of New York School poetry tended to get lost in certain extremes: either language so steeped in colloquialisms that it lost its sense of itself as art, or language so bent against narrative that it lost its sense altogether. Had the Confessional poets widened their scope, they might have gained a sense of consonance with poetry as a high art form—but the narrowness of their thematic scope precluded a sense of serious engagement with issues that transcended the personal. As such, they, along with the Objectivists, the Beats, and the New York School poets, fall squarely under the rubric that covers minor poetry and poets, when placed next to the scope and achievements of Eliot and Yeats. Other groups, like the San Francisco Renaissance poets and the Language poets, seem like a mélange and a mish-mash of these styles. Minor Modernists (Pound, Williams, Stevens, Stein) initiated many trends toward disjuncture and colloquialism; because the high art balance of Yeats and Eliot was (and remains) more rigorous and more difficult to achieve, it has inspired fewer immediate imitations.

High art balance, as such, depends on serious engagements with the history of poetry, and also with a sense of discernment. Though Eliot did dote upon some minor French poets, his knowledge of the history of major poetry artists, as expressed in his early essays, was complete and solid. It allowed him vantage points that set his sense of aesthetic equilibrium on a high level. Because he had the discerning impulse to separate wheat from chaff, he could accomplish the major feat of moving poetry forward in innovative ways while also conserving the best of poetry that had come before. Yeats' engagement with history was no less complete; though he lacked the theoretical bent that defined Eliot, it would have been unthinkable for him not to know the Romantics, the Neo-Classical poets, the Metaphysical poets, Elizabethans, back to Dante, Chaucer, and beyond. Yeats also had a comprehensive knowledge of Irish mythology, which added an ancillary resource to his repertoire. Put simply: these are men that did their homework, on any number of levels. Because they maintained a sense of discipline and responsibility about their traces, moving forward meant taking history into account at each juncture. The idea that history is a flush, that the canon of English language poetry was largely created by and for white males and so has a built-in obsolescence, is pitifully shallow and ultimately pernicious. If this canon is not yet a fully multicultural canon, it is nonetheless an indispensable resource; it is the only true measure we have of how far our own arrows can sail out into the universe. Century XX encouraged poets, after 1943, to eschew the essential challenge presented by Eliot and Yeats; how to move forward and conserve at once. As the twenty-first opens, it is

this dual impulse which again presents itself as our brightest hope to rise to the challenges presented by a rich, if increasingly distant, past.

Entitlements: Post-Modernity, Capitalism, and the Threat to Poetry's History

(2010)

It is a topos that needs to be revisited periodically: capitalism is only a problem for those who have no capital. The brighter bits of Marxism reinforce and attempt to resolve this: a redistribution of goods and material wealth to level societies whose material facets have been skewered towards a chosen few. But the problem with poetry is not factory owners; with so little capital invested in poetry, "ownership" as such is more a spiritual than a material issue. The problem with poetry and poets is that you can't feel the sting of capitalism unless you have no, or little, capital; if you attempt to live off of your poetry (or even as a low-ranking academic) this will almost certainly be the case. Not too many poets have the material shrewdness to earn, through their own efforts, vast amounts of capital; what does happen is that people enter poetry (and the other arts) and are able to do so because of the capital they have inherited. This is more problematic than it appears to be at first—if you can't feel the sting of capitalism (its' greed, lack of justice, spiritual entropy), but have had to expend no effort in casting off the shackles that capitalism imposes, your relationship both to the arts and to society itself becomes so ineluctably warped that you might as well be an alien. In America, we call these folks "trust-funders." Whatever they are called, the attitude they tend to adopt in relation to poetry is one of entitlement; that they are entitled to deem their creations (however meager or nonce) poetry, to adopt an attitude of totalized complacency (without having earned it through genius or innovation), to turn workshops into exercises in egotism and readings into travesties. The attitude of entitlement fits snugly into a post-modern ethos—that art requires a minimum of effort, that any hokey contrivance can, will, and does pass for art, and that the only absolute is simple: capital can and will buy status. That's the post-modern spirit (which is, of course, a blatant oxymoron); to the funded go the spoils. Marxism works for many poets because they've never had the experience of having no capital, so they don't see or feel its dark edges—conspicuous consumption has engendered an ethos of complete indulgence. Entitlement means that, no matter what these poets create, it has to be as good as anyone else's creations: they're as good (of course) as Keats, or Yeats, or Eliot. Post-modern capitalism looks in the check-book rather than the history books to see what the balance is; high numbers take the place of high thoughts.

So the approach that many poets have to Marxism is twice-removed from Marxism in its pure state: by a surfeit of capital, and by a self-satisfaction that accepts and encourages the existent capitalistic system (implicitly, if not explicitly). Poetry becomes a business like any other—if you do good business (manifested in book sales, reading attendance, blog numbers, Google hits, or votes on Goodreads), and if what is quantifiable works in your favor, you are entitled to assume parity with anything or anyone. What is a poet (or an artist) legitimately entitled to? Not much. If you are serious about what you do, if you are not caught in a welter in which post-modern and capitalistic ethos creates a bogus sense of validity, you know that genuine imposition can only be created by history (assuming you are not imposed upon too much be material circumstances). History, if viewed properly, takes back entitlements. The flimsy history created by post-modernity contrives to impose an intimidating veneer; but a lack of real engagement with history creates a sense of the ephemeral which, if not embraced, (and post-modernists do express consonance with the "ephemeral" as such) must be rejected absolutely. Many post-modern equations are simple: "incorporate or perish" is one. What, beyond creating an imposing veneer, constitutes post-modern "incorporation"? Nothing. Post-modernists, for what's often an obvious reason, feel entitled to stop at the surface; the reason is that a persistent sense of entitlement inhibits and destroys human depth. Deprivation often engenders depth—if you have never been deprived, it is difficult to imagine a need for depth. And if you espouse and embrace Marxist levels of material engagement, but fail to connect them to your own existence and begin to take some personal responsibility for it, you become a kind of sham factory owner.

Anyone in the arts who has not inherited funds the way that you have becomes an underling. Underlings can be brushed aside; what begins as warped Marxism becomes straightforward Darwinian obduracy. Simply put, the arts aren't fair, and they never have been. What post-modernity imposes is a context in which there is not only no justice in who "gets in," there is no justice in what they feel they are entitled to do when/if they do get in. What do they feel entitled to do, more often than not?

Post-modernity often seems to represent an infinite regress towards oblivion; a plummet that never ends, and in which any kind of ascension becomes the butt of arrogant laughter; if history and art don't matter, and if you happen to be an artist, satisfaction arises not from what you create but in the sense of entitlement that justifies creating nothing. As much as Marxism is embraced, senses of base and superstructure in this grow confused; there can be no modes of production if what you produce is an acknowledged nothing. One gist of post-modernism is that there is no base—because, we are told, the idea of a "base" in art is a hokey contrivance, and there is no point in actually producing anything (except to preserve appearances.) So why be an artist at all? The reason is simple: because it's easy. Entitlement, if taken to an extreme (as it often is) negates a sense of responsibility. Do whatever you want; who cares? As the flush ethos dictates, check your numbers, throw out some more red herrings, everything's fine. But the depth engendered by deprivation has a difficult time accepting this—and post-modernity, like every other paradigmatic movement in the history of the arts, must end. While there is no sure sign that a nascent depth is going to permanently erode the foundations of post-modernism, it is doubtless that different eras require different artistic modes of production to hold a mirror up to dynamic circumstances. In Western life today, a sense of anti-dynamism, of stasis, has been put in place by harsh economic circumstances. It is likely that the post-modernists will respond to this in the same manner that they responded to fin de siècle entropy—with more acknowledged nothings, bolstered (at times and only in bits) by theories that dictate the shrewd and compelling nature of nothings, to reflect back the nothingness that will have been imposed on us if we have borne the brunt of these circumstances. In other words, post-modernism's potency and efficacy are crippled by the complete material security that enfolds many of its' constituents. We need something new right now.

Are any of us entitled to a new movement that evinces more depth and more engagement on more levels? We are not. But to the extent that one seed may be put into place (and with the hope that the seed may grow), I will say that what we need is to move upwards, towards some kind of affirmation, rather than towards new and greater levels of oblivion (born, more often than not, from obliviousness). Those who have inherited money often inherit nothing from history; those who have to create their own lives may create something worthy to be inherited, that has consonance with the more developed moments in art's history. In this context, the important thing is that nothing is to be closed, and what is created is a mystery that each artist must resolve for him or herself. No one should be entitled to anything but the right to create; the world owes none of us anything, not even this. That the right to create should be earned is something that post-modernity has completely lost touch with; that material wealth is, itself, a red herring where the arts are concerned is something that needs to be looked into. But if something is to rise, and shortly, from the ashes of a fading post-modern regime, let's hope that when/if we have earned our places, it is because we know that in art, there is no way to earn anything but through intense and devoted labor.

On the Necessity of Bad Reviews

(2009)

The attitudes prevalent in the poetry world today have created an atmosphere in which bad reviews of poetry books are (for the most part) unacceptable. The phenomenon of the poetry review-as-puff-piece takes place in a wide variety of contexts—online journals and blogs, print journals, press releases, and anthologies. The poetry protocol of gathering positive quotes to use on book jackets fits squarely under this rubric. I would like to opine that this trend, which encourages clannishness, reinforces coterie affiliations, and establishes poetry as a lightweight art-form, is largely negative and needs to be changed. Even popular music contexts encourage more healthy debate, where aesthetics are concerned, than poetry does. Aesthetic debates in poetry tend to be "my group against your group," a struggle for uncontested hegemony, rather than the productive arguments that initiated movements like British Romanticism and Modernism, which resulted in stunning new work. "Soft poetry culture" necessitates that interviewers ask easy questions, older poets are surrounded by fawning sycophants, while younger poets jockey for position based on their connections and alliances. For poetry to become a culturally heavyweight art-form again, poets (especially the ones being nurtured in MA and MFA programs) need to be taught to question their teachers, challenge poetry systems, and (perhaps most importantly) to write both good reviews and negative ones. The poetry world suffers from a dearth of angry young men and women, of rebels and revolutionaries. The first question that arises from these assertions is a crucial one—if "soft poetry culture" is predominant, how and why did it become this way? The answers are complex and myriad—nevertheless, a tentative investigation may be fruitful if it is agreed that these issues are, in fact, issues, and important ones.

Most poets in this day and age have some affiliation with academia. If you are reading a modern poet's book, there is a very good chance that the poet has not only a university degree but an advanced degree (usually an MFA or MA) as well. The relationship between poetry and academia has become so entwined that it may no longer be worthwhile to investigate whether or not this basic association itself is healthy or unhealthy. What, exactly, are poets being taught in these programs? Programs vary widely, and it would be absurd to generalize; nonetheless, I have both an MFA and an MA, one from a conservative institution, one from a liberal institution. This puts me in a unique position to comment on this situation. I do so, enjoining the caveat that I welcome both commentary and dissent, and that there may or may not be representativeness to my experiences. I have found conservative and liberal poets to be roughly 70% similar; they tend to credit themselves with much more differential than is actually there. Both sides cling very closely to coteries and coterie affiliations; both tend to encourage their students to accept their pronouncements uncritically. In my experience, poetry teachers at this level tend to only use "hardness" (hard pedagogical techniques) to keep others soft. Soft poetry culture dictates a strict master/servant relationship in these contexts—masters can be as hard as they want, servants (students) must remain soft. In more exacting disciplines (the natural sciences, for example), this division is more necessary—answers can be proven, things need to be learnt. But in art, which has as its ontological foundation what might be called "total subjectivities" (no one can prove what works, what does not, and even master narratives often come down to people's opinions), master/slave dynamics are not only unproductive but actively unhealthy. Liberal poets, I have found, are 30% more genuinely liberal than conservative poets, and 70% as pigheaded, domineering, and coercive. Investigation of these issues becomes like playing with Russian dolls; opening up one issue leads directly to the discovery of another one. What leads poetry teachers in these programs to disseminate soft poetry culture through hard tactics? If it has the effect of softening sensibilities, why do sensibilities need to be softened?

I wrote, in a preface to ***Ocho #11***, that poetry is a tough gig, and it is. Material rewards are scarce, competition is fierce, and tremendous dedication is required to even get a foot in the door. Those who have the good fortune to become successful in poetry tend to be warped by the atmosphere of deprivation that surrounds poetry endeavors. The line between those who are successful and those who are not can be thin indeed. Poets are fiercely protective of their little domains (and they usually are very little indeed), and this fiercely protective instinct gets enacted by a process and an impulse not unlike what **Pierre Bourdieu** calls the "demarcative imperative." Those who are above are forced by ambiguous circumstances to say they are above, and to enact this superiority. Students must be softened into receptivity—a student reacting to hardness with hardness would be an impermissible threat, in a radically unstable, ambiguous context. This is how soft poetry culture is perpetuated—through the hardness of teachers. And it is through teachers that students often obtain their first publication opportunities. Thus, young poets become "foot soldiers" for their teachers—they are soft meat, determined to carry the torches that have been passed down to them. Because so many poetry contexts are predicated on regionally or aesthetically dominant coteries, to break out of these rigid structures is a task indeed, and one younger poets are not encouraged to undertake. "Toe the line," goes the master narrative that dictates so much of younger poets' behavior, "and you will be rewarded; expressions of individualism will lead to irreversible exile status. It is softest (and most rewarding) to conform."

Textual expressions of conformity often take the form of puff-piece reviews. In an unspoken fashion, this becomes a mode of "playing the game," which necessitates perpetual softness. It also must be noted that "screaming at the other side" (who may or may not be listening) of the liberal/conservative, experimental/mainstream divide does not necessarily qualify as hardness. It reinforces a poet's own coterie associations, and is often used as a tactic to draw attention to one's self. Honest looks at those within one's own domain are hard to come by, and this fact prohibits poetry from becoming as rigorous (formally and thematically) as it could be. Students beaten into softness are so terrified of losing their little places that criticism of what immediately surrounds them would be unthinkable. Combat (perverse as this sounds) needs to start at home; conflict and warrior skills should not merely be aimed at distant enemies. Conflict within coteries should be encouraged; individualism needs both to be espoused and practiced by teachers. Taking this a step further, the question remains as to what a more ideal (or "heavyweight") poetry world would look like. Why would, not a dominant strain of bad reviews, but a balance of good and bad reviews, inject new life into an art-form that many people have given up for dead?

Young artists need to have teeth, bite, and guts. To the extent that young artists are being taught that teeth, bite, and guts (and I will resist the temptation to get academic with these words, as commonsense definitions apply) are negative, undesirable attributes, the poetry world looks (at least from a distance) like a realm of stilted pabulum. Non-poets tend to think of poetry as boring; it often is. Artists that work in other mediums actively employ the works of canonical poets, while eschewing works of contemporary poets, for a simple reason: because contemporary poets are not good enough (this applies to everything from R. B. Kitaj's usage of Eliot to Lady Gaga's fascination with Rilke). Older poets have had their shot; the decades to come may show to what extent they have or have not succeeded in their endeavors. But the real fate of modern poetry is in the hands of younger poets, who (whether they realize it or not) do have options. One healthy option to explore is the possibility that an approach grounded, not in softness or hardness alone, but in a balance of softness and hardness (as manifested both in poems and in reviews), would be conducive to the growth of healthy, diverse poetry contexts, which could transcend the usual coterie prejudices. As a final confession, I will say this: I have written my share of puff-pieces. But the time has ended in which I can do this in good conscience; and to the extent that I feel writing negative reviews could, in some sense, be productive, I will be willing to get the hatchet out.

Wordsworth @ McDonald's

(2005)

With the advent of the Information Superhighway, cell-phones, and other Digital Now-signifiers, we have an entered an era in which all reality is virtual. Poets who give serious thought to the why of their craft are faced with a dilemma: how to create poems in the **Wordsworthian** manner (i.e. real language of people) when technology has outmoded the Romantic model that still dictates so much serious poetry. Language poetry schematized a new model—oblique, skewered, post-modern. This model was a useful innovation that has, in roughly thirty years time, grown stale and somewhat irrelevant. Poets, and what's left of their audience, still want the Wordsworthian model to hold. They want feeling to be relevant, and language to enact a mimesis of interior (real) processes. The problem is, that if we acknowledge a central virtual quality to modern life, real language may be an impossibility.

So, we cannot depend completely on Wordsworth anymore. For the creation of virtual poetry, it will be necessary for the poet to internalize things ordinarily seen as epitomizing crassness and "low" reality—like McDonald's. As one sits in McDonald's circa 2005, it becomes clear that agile minds are working to keep the corporate axles greased— minds from which it is possible to learn. Hanging in the window, a large picture advertising chicken strips; a young African-American male dangling one in front of parted lips, beaming; inscribed on the blank space above his head, a motto: "I'm lovin' it". This is obviously rhetorical, in that the "I" here is general and universalized. "I" is all of us, in the contented bliss of a chicken-strip meal. So, McDonald's is subtle enough to posit an "I" that really means "you". How many poets left in America can say the same? How many poets are so subtle, so engaged, so virtual that their "I's" resonate as "yous"? Poets want a perpetual striking of Wordsworth's bell; they still believe in "real language" (even Language poets inherently must believe before they deconstruct); their "I's" stay isolate, separate, derelict. Let's set up a small chart and enumerate exactly the binary being portrayed here:

Wordsworth (language/ real men)	McDonald's (I'm lovin' it)
gender-specific, un-PC	gender-neutral, PC (I)
(language/men) static/abstract	"I" In medias res
definitely serious-intentioned	moderately serious

Immediately it becomes apparent that the McDonald's ad execs are, on some level, more linguistically sharp than us, the poets. Their motto is PC, active, and moderately serious, where Wordsworth is sexist, static, and excessively serious. What I am calling for is a poetics equal parts Wordsworth and McDonald's. Post-modernists would resolve this binary tension by making a mockery of it (especially the Wordsworth half), in an attempt to reinforce an ethos of "virtuality" or "nothing real." Though reality has grown to be (arguably) virtual, I am looking for an earnest attempt to implement both sides of this binary, the Wordsworth and the McDonald's, the "I" that's "I" and the "I" that's "you," the static and the active, definite and moderate seriousness. This does not preclude irony and slant; rather, they become a tool to express underlying profundities. What's needed to achieve balance is Negative Rhetopoeiac Capability. That is, a poem must attempt to straddle the Wordsworth/McDonald's binary without irritably grasping after rhetorical reason, or making a mockery of either side. This ensures a poetics both actively virtual and substantially real.

Some of these **Frank O'Hara** bits are illustrative of successful work in this vein:

I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and

casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with
her face on it.

Leroi comes in
and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12
times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop
a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible
disease but we don't give her one we
don't like terrible diseases.

O'Hara's conversational diction fulfills Wordsworth binary-end, even as his affirmative, ebullient voice veers into "I'm lovin' it" territory (in medias res, active, performative). This is "serious ephemeral" poetry, using Pop Culture references as quotidian signifiers that nevertheless have substantial internal ("felt") relevance. O'Hara, though he skirts post-modern (or "Pop") territory, does not make a mockery of anything—he's kidding, but he isn't, he's at McDonald's reading Wordsworth, he is where we want to be: on the edge of a new Mannerism.

O'Hara's oeuvre as a whole is useful, because O'Hara has a key "Wordsworth McDonald's" quality that most serious poets lack—charm. His poems, in their moderately serious/actively engaging tenor, are charming. Why wouldn't Wordsworth at McDonald's be charming? Can you imagine the Bard of Tintern Abbey reckoning a "Solitary Milkshake," finding himself overwhelmed by a spontaneously felt Big Mac? O'Hara's charm comes from unexpected juxtapositions, charged with feeling. He is, in this sense, a good Wordsworthian—but he lives in the present moment, always. Dualism is manifested as whim. Modern signifiers are internalized, processed, felt. So, McDonald's has led us from Wordsworth to Frank O'Hara, who was virtual before virtual became real. He instinctively navigated a Mannerist-space that has yet to be pursued by a substantial number of serious poets (who perhaps mistrust his merely moderate seriousness). Yet, poets who lean and cling to Wordsworthian "reality" can often be heard complaining about lack of interest. Poets who want to achieve something real in this day and age really have no choice but to get Mannerist. Mannerism is differentiated from Pop (and the post-modern ethos that followed in its' wake) in this way—Pop is a Campbell's Soup can, Mannerism is a Campbell's Soup can held by Michelangelo's David. Mannerism includes Formal Rigor, depth, gravitas (Wordsworth virtues) along with spontaneous, active, Pop-based signifiers and imagery (McDonald's). A willful jumble of high and low.

Claiming an essential virtuality to modern life needs some justification. What I mean to say is that image/ technology-saturation has become so rampant in Western society that even those of us who'd like to lead pure, uncluttered, Wordsworth-style existences have cell-phones, use the Internet, watch TV and movies, etc. Cell-phone communication seems particularly distressing, substituting expedience for intimacy (transpiring as it does while we are "multi-tasking"), breaking down boundaries (anyone with our number can reach us anytime, so long as we keep our phones on), often poisoning our relationship to the Now by taking us out of the present moment. So, imagine—one is at a dinner party, adjourned to the living room to watch (if we are lucky) something by **Cocteau** or **Godard**. Our cell-phone rings; we are expecting an important (perhaps career-related) call; we answer. We are living in three realms—dinner party, Cocteau, cell-phone—at once. These situations have become familiar and common to most of us. They happen all the time, and they (for me at least) have added up to a feeling of alienation from the essential presence of the Now. This is especially pertinent for city-dwellers. The unreality/virtual component goes way up, it's difficult to feel solid with a flux not only in the outside world but in one's hand-bag and one's computer. When I speak of an encroachingly preponderant virtual world, that's what I mean. Disengagement from singularly focused consciousness.

Poets must address this situation precisely. When Wordsworth, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, spoke of "gross stimulants" contaminating mass aesthetic judgment, could he even have fathomed our current level

of emotional dispossession and image-centered “savage torpor”? I’m all for a poetry that confronts this head-on by using some of it! The architect **Robert Venturi** says, “Viva Mannerism that richly acknowledges ambiguity and inconsistency in a complex and contradictory time.” Maybe we could go so far as to call O’Hara a “Mannerist”—his exaggerated reactions and humor, his implicit ethos of “mess is more”. McDonald’s “I’m lovin’ it” also has the essential Mannerist hyperbolizing spirit. Wordsworth, the sober, steady philosophe, was obviously no Mannerist—but why not keep some of his level-headed piety regarding art’s pleasure-giving, insight-shedding mission, his emotion-cherishing mind?

To me, it is a question of letting in. Don’t write off McDonald’s for its’ Mannerist modernity or Wordsworth for his Romantic self-absorption—rather, let them both in equally, so that what we produce is contemporary and durable, Mannerist and tradition-preserving, face-to-face intimate and cell-phone expedient. O’Hara was, as far as I can tell, adequately a master at absorbing modernity-signifiers in such a way that he represented them without condescension, and with a loving eye. This has obvious ties to Warhol, Pop-art in general, **Rauschenberg’s** Combine-paintings, etc. Mannerism, however, has grounding in tradition that Pop lacks. Pop did away with the past in embracing glossy surfaces; Mannerism wants the glossy surface and the earthy depth. It’s an impossibly ambitious stratagem for a new urban poetics—but why not?

Loving the Alien

(2006)

Poetics involves both “transcription” and “recollection,” exteriors internalized and interiors exteriorized. Each process involves the assimilation of interior and exterior elements, “the ineffable In of Out and Out of In”. Maybe we could call this point of in/out convergence meta-rational. We recognize the “rightness” of Out becoming In and In becoming Out, but we don’t know exactly how or why it happens. Pursuant to this, it’s possible to construct a neat little binary from the compositional theories of **Jack Spicer** and **William Wordsworth**. On the one hand, we have Spicer, “spooky” California poet maudit, with his transcription theory—everything worthy to be written is “dictated” by an unknown (alien) Other. On the other hand, Romantic man-of-Earth Wordsworth posits a poetry of recollection (introspective and otherwise). Wordsworth’s famous “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” is ancillary to this. Yet, if we throw Jack and William into a dialectic blender, we see that each theory leaves something unaccounted for; transcription must be done from an inside (with what Spicer calls “furniture,” whether the space is den or living room apparently doesn’t matter), and recollection must be inspired by outside things (Tintern Abbeys or Candlestick Parks, numinous or sub-numinous things-in-themselves). It becomes clear that Wordsworth and Spicer fit together like puzzle pieces, but the puzzle is larger than them.

Certain things seem apparent. If we “transcribe”, it is because we feel the Martians have something worth saying (else why would we do it?) Let’s call this “Martian empathy”. The Martian isn’t strictly Other, but is both potentially comprehensible and definitely social; “transcription” is, in a sense, “recollection” of our interactions with the Martians. The dialectic knot tightens and the meta-rational comes into play again; we feel the “rightness” of the interaction without seeing how it is or is not logically determined. Conversely, “recollection” is transcription of outside things (persons or the inanimate Natural forms Wordsworth loves), what they’ve “told” us merely by existing in the manner they do. This is the “language of voiceless things”, not Martians but certainly things that aren’t “given” to human consciousness, things that can only be “seen into” with conscious effort. Because the experience is heightened and changed during the compositional process, “recollection” is also meta-rational. The raw experience is “charged into life” by being put in verse, by the “spontaneous overflow” that may or may not have been felt at the “encounter point”, but which is discovered in recollection (“mind associating ideas in a state of excitement”). What transcription and recollection share is the experience of the alien becoming familiar in a moment of meta-rationality.

Spicer’s poem *Thing Language* bears this out:

> This ocean, humiliating in its’ disguises
> Tougher than anything.
> No one listens to poetry. The ocean
> Does not mean to be listened to. A drop
> Or crash of water. It means
> Nothing.
> It
> Is bread and butter
> Pepper and salt. The death
> That young men hope for. Aimlessly
> It pounds the shore. White and aimless signals. No
> One listens to poetry.

Spicer uses “ocean” as a metaphor for the vast universal body of poetry, “art-language”. There must be some “recollection” here—that the ocean is “tougher than anything” is a subjective pre-value judgment, obviously born out of lived (“recollected”) experience. The only way to know how tough the ocean is is to swim in it! Spicer’s poet-life, rather than his Martian-encounters (however indistinguishable the two may seem to him) allow him the luxury of this large, authoritative utterance. He’s “recollecting in tranquility” the tumultuousness of the creative process. Any feeling of a “beyond-Jack” speaking through him would not be distinguishable to even a preternaturally close reader. Likewise “no one listens to poetry”, a maxim meant rhetorically with years of hard poet-living behind it. The Martians, should they have dictated this to him, would’ve been telling him what he already knew (and had worked into gist-rhetoric) before. Tinges of **Mannerism** here, “I’m lovin’ it” grandiosity transposed into a minor key (and intermixed with a few flatted fifths)—the exaggeration of “tougher than anything” and “no one”. The poem fits in so well with what Spicer said in his lectures (poetry as meaningless conglomerate of contingencies, not for pleasure, essentially a negative apparition), that one feels the presence of a hyper-personal “schtick” that Spicer developed in all areas of his literary practice. The hyper-personal is what Spicer wanted most to avoid, maybe because he knew that it’d be impossible. The boundaries between “Zen emptiness” and hyper-personality are paper thin—both are exaggerated (“Mannerist”) states, extremes. The “ocean”, seen in its’ totality, has a “blankness”—the subject objectifying the ocean, on the other hand, has only his developed sense of self (“personality”) with which to counter (or reflect or balance) the blankness. Spicer isn’t in the poem but directly behind it, which is really just as visible. The bind of ineluctable “Self-hood” was familiar to him, “transcription” being the surest antidote. Yet the obvious preponderance of recollection (at least in “Thing Language”) makes the entire intellectual construct behind “transcription” seem strained.

On to W. W. Here’s his famous short poem *A slumber did my spirit seal*:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

First, a digression…one way “transcription” is supposed to happen is through metaphor. The spirits “told” **Yeats** (in the anecdote delivered by Spicer in his lectures) “We’re giving you metaphors for your poetry”. That would be a good “furniture arranging strategy”, no? Wordsworth’s poem is (it seems to me) essentially metaphoric—“slumber” is a metaphor for lover/love interest (possibly “Lucy”, could be anyone), revealed in third-person signifying “she” used from the third line on. A love affair, or “being in love”, awakens us on certain levels, on others “puts us to sleep”. So, while part of the poem is “recollection” (Wordsworth is talking, albeit metaphorically, about a relationship he’s had), in using “slumber” as abstract personal pronoun (highly unusual for him), one could argue that Wordsworth was mitigated by Martian influence, i.e. he was transcribing a metaphor the Martians gave him.

The difference that leans me towards Wordsworth’s base position (poem-as-recollection) is that, while the metaphor used in this poem might be Martian inspired (transcribed), everything else about it (its’ tone, form, subject and object) came from Wordsworth’s furniture (recollection-material). Both transcription and recollection are often operative in poetry, but recollection is both more necessary and more ubiquitous. Poets write about what they know about and what they know about is their furniture. Spicer’s error was to choose the metaphor of something inanimate (furniture) for what is actually most animate in the poet’s

consciousness. This is what we can classify as all “recollection material”—thoughts, feelings, dreams, whims, etc. Transcription becomes problematic if the Martians have to deal with reactive, rather than inactive material. Not that Spicer’s perceived Other isn’t a provocative thought—it is—just that Wordsworth’s ideas have superior grounding and superior relevance. You can get away from transcription anytime you like (maybe even use your favorite lines), but recollection is unavoidable. This begs the question that each poet must answer for him or herself—to what extent should Martians be sought? They do seem to have some good ideas. And metaphors.

The Decay of Spirituality in Poetry

(2010)

Artists that live in the western world in this day and age are often forced to confront dominant strains of materialism, greed, and capitalistic interest. To an extent, poets get the worse end of this bargain—unable to make a living from their work, forced to support themselves by means that might be distasteful to them, surrounded by influences that anathematize the values they hope to embody. Yet poets, like everyone else, are themselves dominated by social interests which make the interests of those around them difficult to avoid. We must live in society; not only that, but because we must subsist through means that are not (for the most part) generated by our work, we must participate, to a greater or lesser extent, in the materialism, greed, and capitalistic interests that run rampant through the majority of the population of the respective societies we inhabit. The chameleonic tendency of poets (and of artists in general) has been widely noticed; unfortunately, many poets take on stripes that sully the spiritual essence of the duties they perform when they compose. We cannot shut the world out, but by letting it in we corrupt ourselves; this has always been true of poets and other artists to some extent, but it is especially so in 2010. Even as the Internet has revitalized certain aspects of poetic practice, the forces of greed have grown more extreme as recession has swept Europe and the States, making resources scarce and even minor material gains hard-won. It is not surprising, then, that strains of materialism prevalent in western societies have infiltrated poets' texts. What are these strains, and how do they operate?

The theories of **Karl Marx** have exerted a powerful influence on the few preceding generations of experimental poets, but it is a more ambiguous influence than has been generally noticed. Because Marx espouses the replacement of capitalistic materialism with another kind of materialism (the material domination of the working classes), what we have in Marx is a kind of meta-materialism, that feeds on itself, with anything transcendental presumed guilty until proven innocent. Poets that subscribe to Marxist tenets have political agendas; poetry becomes an agent to fight capitalism. But this poetry still has its intellectual roots in a materialism that is more or less complete. That there might be other aspects to reality than the material; that consciousness is vaster than merely material perceptions can encompass; that the transcendentalism that would ascribe to the visible world an incomplete-at-best importance; these schemas, often dismissed as Romantic and thus regressive, are denied outright. What is, is—poetry that seeks to affirm this wants to embody text as a sole agent, a kind of material, that can, of its own essence, create worthwhile, substantial, memorable poems. It would be precipitate to assert that there is no spirituality whatsoever in the poetry of the American **Language Poets**, for example: but that this spirituality is one that denies that "spirit" is, in all its ontological nebulousness, an important agent in poetic practice, would be difficult to deny. Poets with Marxist leanings bridle at words like "soul" and "spirit"; they perceive these words as tokens of delusion, demonstrations of an inability to face the concrete realities of the world and thus to have contemporary efficacy. Looking beyond Marx, some generations of experimental poets have also sought to embody the relationship to language initiated by the Deconstructionists of the late twentieth century. This consummated relationship is, I feel, less a success (and I do believe the Marxist poets understand Marx) than a misunderstanding.

There is, I believe, a spiritual essence inherent in Deconstructionist philosophy that is often ignored. The Deconstructionists, with, among others, **Jacques Derrida**, representing the pack, saw in language a kind of dissolution of subjectivity, a movement subjects could make from unitary realities to realms that encompassed more than subjectivity alone could hold. It would be amiss to ascribe any kind of transcendental aim to Deconstructionism, especially where subjectivity is concerned; and there exists a chance that Deconstructionists might have been even less comfortable with words like "soul" and "spirit"

than Marxists were. But that language itself is an arbitrary system leading to an infinite regress, balanced with the realization that words are tactile objects that are capable of containing, in their infinite admixtures, entire worlds; can, potentially, lead to a relationship with language that has a more than invisible connection to realms of subjectivity and transcendental engagement than is commonly supposed. The notion of Romantic Deconstructionism is absurd; but that Deconstructionism does not necessarily negate all forms of transcendental engagement has been misunderstood by experimental poets, who seek to evacuate all hints of anything transcendental from their texts, seemingly forgetting that poetry and philosophy serve very different functions, which fulfill very different ends. To be short: just as there is a lexicon that serious philosophers have a right to use (and this formulation is, admittedly, rather over-determined), there is a lexicon that poets have a right to use, and the inheritance of words like “soul” and “spirit” from our forefathers is a worthwhile one. Certain poets have used Deconstruction as a pretext to shun a serious, responsible engagement with the history of poetry; beneath their decimating gazes, centuries have been emptied of worth and meaning, and little fads of disjuncture and paratactic repetition have taken root as valuable. Without calling for a precise return to the Romantic, poetry needs to derive what spiritual seeds there are from Deconstructionism (and they are considerable, though they may have been unintended as traces), not to evade the serious tools that poets toil with to create meaning: narrative, the body, human relationships, and the levels that trace all of these things, horizontally and vertically.

I do not presume to demonstrate that poets do or do not have “souls.” What I will say is that the metaphysical is part of our inheritance that needs to be reengaged. It is not only an efficacious way of connecting ourselves to our forefathers; it is an efficacious way of doing something more urgent, and more necessary: through these investigations, we can begin the work of separating ourselves from the debacles of capitalism, now that it is has subsumed so much of the western world. There is a level on which we are shying away from a direct engagement with the materialism of our respective societies by doing this; but that our narratives may draw from both levels, from an engagement that is also a disengagement simultaneously, has not yet been explored to a significant extent. I foresee a return to spirituality that is not merely (or entirely) a rejection of Marxist and Deconstructionist thought, but a hybrid that uses all of these elements to make larger mosaics; poems that read like the great literary narratives that have sustained literary communities for centuries, from **Dante** to **Goethe**, from the British Romantics to **James Joyce** and T.S. Eliot. This, that I envision, is not a return but a movement outward into something more expansive, more developed, and more encompassing than anything that was created by an English-language poet in the second half of the twentieth century.

Anything with an Edge: Rethinking Post-Avant

(2009)

Many definitions have been posited for **post-avant**. There was a flurry of action about five months ago, in which I and a handful of other poets had it out over what post-avant means and what it does not. It was my impression that no general consensus was reached, and that much had been said but little of it had a substantial impact. This goes, certainly, for the things I said too; I do not privilege my own formulations here. Nonetheless, I think the discussion is a worthwhile one, and thinking about it has led me to some new conclusions. Here is the original definition I posited for post-avant: *the diasporic movement of Lang-Po towards a new synthesis with erotic and narrative elements*. That's roughly it. What I have been thinking over the last week is slightly different, and simpler. It is defining post-avant poetry as *anything with an edge*. This begs some immediate questions. What do we mean when we say that a poem, or a book of poems, has an edge? How do we strictly define edgy poetry? Colloquially, if it is said that something has an edge, it usually denotes that it is pointed, direct, sharp, and that it skirts the uncomfortable or the unsettling. It may deal, thematically, with a difficult issue, or it may take an unusual stance on an issue that has become stuck in a rut of settled representations. One obvious historical example would be **Shakespeare's** sonnet *My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun...*, which takes Petrarchan conventions and turns them on their heads. Or, the way **Pound** conflates two seemingly irreconcilable disparates in *In a Station of the Metro*, creating an unlikely synthesis of urban and rural imageries. Perhaps, owing to the sophisticated games played in his sonnets, we could call Shakespeare the first post-avant poet. Why not?

What else is edgy, pointed, direct, and sharp? I might be useful to name some things that are not edgy, but that tend to bear the post-avant moniker. Lazy disjunctive writing is, for me, not post-avant, specifically because it has no edge. Having an edge necessarily connotates making some kind of sense. It is hard, actually, to have any kind of thematic element included at all, if you do not make any narrative sense. I have no intention of picking on anyone in particular, yet we all know lazy disjunctive writing (most of us know it a mile away) and it is not difficult to see that by this new definition, it does not fit under the rubric of post-avant. Epiphanic poetry, anything that relies on sentiment, would obviously not be post-avant, in these terms. How about spoken word poetry? That is a tough nut to crack; good spoken word poetry certainly has an edge, certainly carries thematic elements, so it would be hard-going to deny it a place in post-avant. What needs to be discussed is how stringently standards of formal rigor are applied to post-avant. If no standards are applied, someone could get onstage at a reading and say shit fuck piss ten times and be post-avant. All those combustible arguments about "serious" poetry versus "performance" poetry need to be dragged out of the closet for the thousandth time; we have to find ourselves making distinctions and setting boundaries that might be inflammatory. I have no intention of laying down my version of the law; but where performance poetry is concerned, inclusion under the aegis of post-avant cannot, I think, be taken for granted. Which may, unfortunately, invalidate the anything with an edge tag-line. Or maybe not. The beauty of dealing with a new movement is that it is still amorphous and, if you are lucky (which I may or may not be), you can do your bit to shape it.

I affixed a picture of **Frank O'Hara** to this post because (perhaps this is a bit obvious) anything with an edge follows directly from going on your nerve. Why is it that O'Hara (along with few others) gets respect from both major sides of the American poetry landscape? How is it possible to be loved by both Billy Collins and Language Poets? There are myriad reasons, but I would say that a major one is the deft manner in which O'Hara creates narratives that have an edge. The East Coast created O'Hara just as surely as Paris created Baudelaire; O'Hara's version of Negative Capability meant creating poetry that mirrored, as precisely as possible, the edginess of East Coast street-life mid-century XX. If O'Hara was a kind of conduit, this was

facilitated by the seeming impetuosity of his poems. Is "anything with an edge" impetuous? Not necessarily. But the element of conscious craft and "edginess," taken as an indicator of aesthetic worth, make uneasy bedfellows. On the other hand, the tension between uneasy bedfellows can make for interesting poetry. There is no way to seal this thing up in one post (and blog-posts are often themselves "go on your nerve" exercises); but I think the idea of post-avant and anything with an edge could lead to a fruitful discussion, especially because it gets boring writing a diasporic movement... over and over again. I have always felt that O'Hara's best poetry started something that has not yet been finished. How would O'Hara feel about potentially having started a movement? Well, he did **Personism** already, so technically this would be the second movement...the more (I hope he would say) the merrier! I hope to go into what constitutes "edginess" and "anything with an edge" in days to come.

Book Review: Jordan Stempleman's *Facings*

(2008)

When comparisons regarding poetry and poets become an issue, it is easy to remember a cliché that, in the manner of the best clichés, always seems applicable: comparisons are odious. Yet comparing things is both central to poetic practice (for those of us hardy enough to go in for a good simile or metaphor now and then) and critical practice as well. Put simply, comparisons are how a vigorous literary mind works. We are able to make sense of what is new by comparing it to older things. It works if you reverse the equation, too; as **T. S. Eliot** noted in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, remarkable new works transform and transmute our conceptions of older masterpieces (if we posit that there are, in fact, poems good enough to be considered general masterpieces.) It would seem that, if comparisons are odious, we, as poets and critics, had better get used to the unpleasant smell of ourselves and of others. Or, we could throw the cliché out the window, working under the assumption that throwing clichés out the window is part of our job anyway. That's probably better.

All these issues have been going through my head as I've read, re-read, and re-read **Jordan Stempleman's** *Facings*, which was put out by Otoliths in 2007. Not only have I been tempted to compare it to things, but there is one specific, generally regarded masterpiece that I've been tempted to compare it to: **John Ashbery's** *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. All the same, I've been wary about this comparison. There are some conservative things to say, and I do not believe that absolute, unequivocal parity has been established. Nevertheless, all of *Facings* is of a high quality, and a handful of the poems do, in fact, compare (and achieve parity or near-parity) with the poems in Ashbery's book. Thematically, Stempleman and Ashbery cover much of the same ground: alienation, isolation, displacement (sexual, emotional, spiritual, what have you), and the theme that would bind them both to *Four Quartets* era Eliot (to extend the comparative reach), temporality.

I believe it may be best, when one is being ambitious and daring, to get down to brass tacks as quickly as possibly. Here, quoted in full, is a poem from Stempleman's book, called *The Apartment*:

> He asked, who lives there,
> then brought over his
> laundry, covered all the
> windows with socks, his old
> t-shirts, pillowcases now
> separated from their sheets.
> The day seemed to go on
> forever. The sunlight, and only
> the sunlight, almost made its way
> through, went on trying to get in
> for a very long time.

We see a move here that Ashbery often makes: the placement of a character that remains unnamed, never "takes on flesh," and is surrounded by images of implosion and desolation. An obvious example from *Self-Portrait* would be *A Man of Words*, with its memorable opening lines, "His case inspires interest / But little sympathy; it is smaller / Than at first appeared." In the interest of comparison extension, I'd like to opine that the tradition that Ashbery and Stempleman are plugging into here has as much to do with **Bertolt Brecht**, and his famous alienating techniques, than with any poet in the Modern or Post-Modern

canon (though of course Brecht also wrote poetry.) Brechtian alienation gives us characters that we are not meant to identify with. Given his very catholic taste in art, it is certainly likely that Ashbery would incorporate Brechtian alienation techniques into his poems, and Stempleman has followed suit. It is also worth noting that while sophisticated techniques are employed to create a certain ambience around an amorphous character, we nonetheless have a linear narrative here. Just as *A Man of Words*, despite some opacity, tells a story (literary grandeur gone to seed), so Stempleman's poem tells a story too. Temporality extended (the day going on "forever," sunlight trying to get in "for a very long time") gives a sense of stasis, while the title of the poem tells us that, unlike Eliot's *Prufrock*, we are looking at a poor man ("old t-shirts" is another clue) wasting away. Rather than Ashbery's faded grandeur, Stempleman gives us grandeur that never was, is not, and can never be. It would be a bit of a stretch, but you could see in "sunlight" a metaphor for the creative process. Yet this potential saving grace is thwarted, and the ruination that ends Ashbery's *Man of Words* is also in evidence here.

It would seem that the ability to tell a story, without resorting to epiphanic commonplaces, confessional melodrama, or pseudo-profound mythologizing, is relatively rare in modern poetry. When a middle-of-the-road stalwart like **Billy Collins** tells a story, we plug up our ears and stick to a party-line that has become rote: give us inquiry, give us exploration, do not give us hokey generalizations and anecdotal pap. What is remarkable about Ashbery, and Stempleman after him, is that a story is half-told, a narrative half-presented, in such a way that we are invited to create a story along with the poet. In this specific case, Stempleman's language leans towards the homely (in contrast to Ashbery's more baroque tilt): laundry, socks, and sheets. The combination of quotidian items and an incompletely sketched, though obviously alienated character, who moves through the poem in a kind of ellipse, is novel. To bring biography into the equation, Ashbery is an urban poet; New York and New York life constitutes part of his métier. Stempleman is rooted in the Mid-Western (based as he is in Iowa City); homeliness substitutes for urbanity, domestic detail for baroque. Yet the mood, the ambience, is strangely similar.

An even greater quotient of palpability, and affectivity, is visible in *The Retired Couple*:

> Stop licking the bread
> before calling me into that impossible position again.
> The night to remember is impatiently waiting
> to be left alone.
> It is said there is a greenhouse in this night,
> filled with a kind of bamboo
> that can tend to itself.
> I mean, that's actually why it's there.
> To live without us, without so much as a visit,
> doing whatever it is the unthinkable do.

On the surface level, this poem brings to light another predilection that binds Eliot to Ashbery, and then Ashbery to Stempleman; aphorism. Ashbery's famous "The night, as usual, knew what it was doing" (not actually from *Self-Portrait*) is echoed here by Stempleman's "The night to remember is impatiently waiting/ to be left alone." With Stempleman, as with Eliot and Ashbery, aphorism becomes a way of building what is durable from what is memorable. Like an affecting bit of melody, these lines stick in the reader's head without effort, rendering the poem a persistent presence, something ineluctable. The substance of this particular phrase is the same kind of desolation visible in *The Apartment*, only this is a two person, rather than a one person scenario. This heightens the emotional tension, ups the ante, as in Ashbery's *Poem in Three Parts*. It is also worth noting that something is in this poem that is not in Ashbery (or most Eliot); the use of conversational diction we see in "I mean, that's actually why it's there." It is important to remember that Stempleman is, in fact, a younger poet writing in 2008 America. The overt and

excellent classicism of his work would tend to elide this from his profile, but at odd moments such as this, colloquial America jumps into the picture. This is not a fault, and it is to Stempleman's credit that he is able to mix different worlds of language use so effectively.

Ashbery and Stempleman both deal with issues of emotional entanglement. Yet their approach is oblique enough so that, as with storytelling in these poems, we are encouraged to participate. The first two lines of Stempleman's poem are potently ambiguous: "Stop licking the bread / before calling me into that impossible position again." Beyond the brutal sting of a near end-rhyme, what is enunciated here could be a reference to the sexual, the emotional, the spiritual, or any combination or permutation of these. "Impossible position," of course, implies that this retired couple no longer have sex, that physical intimacy has become an impossibility. Yet this is fertile ground for glossing; "licking the bread" could refer to money, or the ravages of age that have forced these two to eat lightly. "Licking the bread" is also repellent, an image of repulsion (leading us back to the Brechtian.) We are not invited to feel along with these two; we may feel like we're looking down the wrong end of a telescope. "Licking" is, or maybe, overtly sexual, so that thematically we have both a kind of avowal and denial in two lines. In short, the way Stempleman opens the poem may give the reader a swift kick in the gut, such as we see when Ashbery writes, in "Farm," "Living with the girl / Got kicked into the sod of things."

I do not have many gripes with *Facings*. I find all of it admirable, some of it stunning. However, I have taken the initiative here and compared it to an established book. If I am not arguing for parity, it would seem fair that I should lay out some reasons that *Facings* is not a masterpiece on a level with *Self-Portrait*. Very little has been said or written about Ashbery's sensuality. People tend to think of him as an intellectual poet. Yet, *Self-Portrait* is full of sensual details, and it is part of the gravitas of the book that it melds the sensual and the intellectual so seamlessly. Stempleman can be a little barren this way, a little short on the sensual details, the "limpid, dense twilight(s)," "smoking dishes," "snake plant(s) and cacti" we see in Ashbery's book. Shortly, what is abstract in Stempleman is more-or-less equal to what is abstract in Ashbery; what is not in Stempleman is the palpable half of the equation. There is more breath is Ashbery's line, more expansiveness, than is found in Stempleman's rather crimped line; Stempleman, in his lesser poems, tends to rely on the merely clever. Yet, Ashbery did not come to *Self-Portrait* until he was in his late forties; Stempleman released this book at age 30. As an unbiased observer, there would seem to me to be little reason not to believe that, in time, Jordan Stempleman could write a book that would achieve absolute parity with Ashbery, and thus set the literary world on its ear all over again.

The Conspiracy Against Poems

(2010)

There is no historical evidence to suggest that during the Romantic era, something called “Poetics” existed. At the time, **Wordsworth** and **Coleridge**, both identifiable as “Lake” poets, initiated investigations of a theoretical nature, centered on poetry. These investigations were one of Coleridge’s métiers; Wordsworth rarely identified himself as something other than a poet. The controversies that surrounded Wordsworth, from the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* forwards, were centered jointly on his poems and the theories that buttressed them. Why is it that in 2010, a majority of poets, particularly those toiling in experimental milieus, seem both more grounded in and more stimulated by theories than by the poems they bolster? What is this nebulous entity, “poetics,” and how has it sapped the life out of what it is meant to serve? The chief weakness of the pursuit of “poetics,” as I see it, is that it puts premiums on two red herrings—novelties and political correctness. “Poetics,” as practiced by the bolder American universities, wants to investigate the newest of the new, anything (striated, of course, within the taut bounds of political correctness) that has not been done before. But practicing “poetics” creates and perpetuates its own kind of romantic ideology—an unthinking and uncritical belief in one’s self-representations as planted firmly in the new, fresh, and bold. This insidious addiction to novelty cuts off poetics from a serious engagement with poetry’s history. It upholds the post-modern ethos that history is essentially a master narrative created in a homogenous vacuum, and thus worthy to be trashed. Why poetics configures a conspiracy against poems is that it bifurcates poetry, as a realm, into two realms (poetry and theory) and dictates that poems should serve theory and not vice versa.

Poets weaned on poetics never quite reconcile themselves to the reality that poems spun out of flimsy theoretical material cannot have any great or striking impact, either in the long or the short term. All this movement towards theory and concept is mirrored in other art forms; but as the post-modern impulse ages, it may be seen that when taken to an extreme, as it has been in experimental poetry, it creates such an aura of rapid obsolescence around new poetry that one wonders why new poems are being written at all. As the novelty aspect of poetics pushes for newness and gimmick-consonance, the political correctness angle further sharpens things against the emergence of poems. Simply put, poetics is mainly a construct established and put into propulsive motion by white, middle-class academics; and as multiculturalism has emerged as a subsidiary branch of post-modernism, a sense of guilt moves participants not only towards the outré but towards anything ethnic or deviant. The problem with poetics generally is that there is little quality control. The conceit of post-modern poetics is that there is no such thing as “quality”; quality is a teetering edifice erected by hegemonic white males to reinforce a master narrative patched up against invasion. Yet the way post-modernists striate things cuts off the levels of nuance within consensus opinions (borne out or subtly shifted over long periods of time) that build canons. Could it be possible that poems sometimes last because they have quality? If quality is not completely subsumed in evanescence, then both novelty and political correctness approaches become quixotic arrows shot at wavering targets. But the point is that in many circles these approaches have become standardized. Generations are now beginning to emerge who have been weaned on these approaches. The upshot is that poets have been formed who respond to theory first, poems second. If poems are a subsidiary branch of theories, then poetry as an endeavor has become so bastardized and decadent that it has ceased to be itself. I want to argue for the permanent preponderance of poems over poetics, and that poems, rather than poetics, need to be starting the fires that add luster to our lives as artists.

There is obviously a neat meta-irony at work here. If this piece starts any fires, it may seem, in the short term, to annihilate itself as poetics qua poetics, willy-nilly. But the larger issues may make the endeavor

worthwhile—that post-modern theory may be killed by artists with art, and if the first baby steps remain theoretical, so be it. What kind of poem, in 2010, could start a fire? Wordsworth's arsonist techniques involved what he deemed a new kind of language. This is what, at the risk of growing tautological, we need now—a new kind of technique. This language, not qua poetics but beyond poetics, would have to eschew certain kinds of novelty and political correctness. It isn't enough to wish for a return to narrative—it needs to be determined what a post-post-modern narrative is (and I freely admit that post-modern is important enough that it needs to be assimilated). The inescapable accusation that follows hard upon these assertions is of regressive conservatism—that moving into a new language world that has consonance with narrative and engages the entire history of poetry is tantamount to going backwards. Yet, it has not yet been widely noted that post-modernism has pushed the art-forms it has infiltrated so far in narrow directions that there is no room for any movement but a backwards one. In an experimental landscape dominated by poems impoverished on both sound and sense levels, to argue for sound and sense becomes a radical move. Thus, sound and sense, the ostensible pillars riveting poems to the ground that they might ascend, become signifiers of detested Romantic impulses, holding out bogus claims of transparency and dangerous delusions of grandeur. In such a landscape, the way forward is the way back, because it must be. For every gimmicky vista that opens up and is instantly thwarted, poets lose more of the capacity to both appreciate and generate the kind of texts that make poetry worthwhile— texts that find inventive ways and shrewd angles with which to create the balance of sound and sense that is the hallmark of durable poetry. Poetry that is truly inventive does not need to entail gimmickry—nor does it need to recreate Romantic sincerity, Victorian sonority, Modernist objectivity or post-modern acerbity. And because invention cannot be anticipated, it would be destructive for me to predict what form it will take or how it will be disseminated.

Poetry is shrewish. For poems to come along and start fires, they would have to burn through enormous resistances. The reason, historically borne out, is that movements become entrenched, and entrenched movements have a tremendous capacity for denial, obliviousness, and discouragement. Because poetry contexts do not entail gross, or even minor, amounts of capital being made or spent, the rewards poets work for are more or less intangible. As such, there is a tremendous delicacy to poets that often congeals into rigidity. That mature poets are often stiffened into rigid postures, and demand degrees of obeisance, necessitates that younger poets receive strong encouragements to conform or be killed. It is also inevitable that each generation will raise only a few poets above the crowd. Nevertheless, to the extent that poets are willing to take up cudgels, a preponderant sense of poems is worth fighting for. Post-modernism has been attenuated into something quite tame; to the extent that the only leaps left to make are, at least in the short term, backwards leaps (into narrative, emotion, sonority) means that the post-modernists expunged too much from what poetry had been before they put up their grayish fortresses. Yet this cannot be a manifesto, because I do not wish to promote any agendas. The essential agenda here is to create, if possible, a context in which poets can decide for themselves the best means of arson, because these grayish fortresses need to be burnt to the ground. It is over the ashes of the moribund that we invent; and if what we invent is poems, and if the poems are built sturdily enough, we do not need to worry that we will appear grayish to whoever succeeds us. That this work needs to be accomplished in different solitudes, rather than in groups, is worth considering; isolation is not merely Romantic, it may be a job requirement. Clannishness and conformity are the major enemies here.

Issues Around Formality

(2019-2025)

Formality in serious art is one of the highest expressions of individuality known to the human race. Why it should be that form and formal rigor were misrepresented in twentieth century America— from the height of individuality into a snobbish, classicist ploy, which represented serious art as priggish, "Sunday School"— is because the twentieth century was essentially, to employ America as paradigmatic, a pedestrian century, in which serious expressions of individuality were frowned upon in high sectors, both in America and in some parts of Western Europe. Earnest expressions of individuality were largely replaced with empty spectacles, and thus the degeneration of the century into a kind of school of quietude. A pedestrian century, like the twentieth largely was, regards formality in serious art as one of the gravest threats to the hegemony of homogeneity and non-individuality; and the persecution of serious individuals is *de rigueur.* What part of me warms to discussing this, is that the minor-leaning twentieth century is now over, Great God Almighty! Now that high ideals around issues of formality (history, philosophy) in art, and serious artistic individuality, are back in circulation, and the lives of serious artists and those who appreciate serious art need not be macabre (serious art does not have to be humorless, either), we can put our crosses and garlic away and look at the issues around formality which are more intriguing.

My own approach to formality in poetry is a complex one. As of one hundred years ago, rhyme and rhyming poetry still dominated most poetry economies, both in the United States and Europe. That poetry should involve heightened language, what is commonly referred to as poetic diction, was not then in question. Century XX stripped things back so that by the turn of the century into the twenty-first, when I began to seriously publish, rhyme and rhyming poetry, and poetic diction with it, had been replaced by a hodge-podge of free verse or blank verse approaches (blank verse being unrhymed iambic pentameter, like *Paradise Lost* or *Hyperion*), and an ambitious poet was forced to make a kind, manner or form of music that would have been considered stunted from the 1920s and back.

Noteworthy that journals, presses, and universities were all complicit in or with this heist. It was a shared effort, that in the United States met with little resistance. Why should there have been? Formal verse in America had done nothing to equal what had been accomplished with formal verse in Europe. The post-modern commonplace of "light" or "breezy" or "stop bravely at the surface" America, which originated mostly from New York, the media, show business, and the South, was prohibitive for many who might otherwise be interested in advanced formality as a means of expression.

Being a student of the Romantics and **Milton**, I chose to address these difficulties, which take formality in poetry and cheese-grate it, by using a technique I call "clustering"; building musical effects into poems without being obsequious to the convention of end-rhymes. On the other hand, when by 2018 I found myself publishing *The Ballad of Robert Johnson*, I felt that the time had arrived when hand-over-fist formality could again be accepted into English-language poetry, as both an expression of individuality and a rejection of what were still standardized poetry operations. Twentieth-century avant-gardism (and I do consider this ballad an adjunct to *post-avant* or the avant-garde, a gambit past Lang-Po into narrativity and Eros) was short on discussions of formal beauty in high art.

"Beauty" itself, as a manifest aim in art, was mistrusted, and gamed against heavily— by post-modernity, multi-culturalism, and academic feminism. In a way and on a very salient level, this game travesties the entire endeavor of major high art consonance, which must include, as a component aspect, the idea that formal beauty ranks high on imperative spreadsheets, no matter what other avant-garde imperatives (to innovation, construction of new idea matrixes) may ride alongside it. The game against formal beauty guaranteed that, in the twentieth century, the likes of **William Blake**— a comparative novice/amateur, whose worth as a higher artist is contained in a philosophical imperative and visionary stance puerile next to Keats' Odal vision— could be given a higher ranking than **Keats**, who supersedes Blake at every point, both as formalist and philosophe.

Keats' prosody, his metrics, the formal beauty of his best poetry, is a political statement in and of itself,

against society which would impinge on the individual, against individual-slandering authority as well. In a certain way and on a certain level, formal beauty in high art is the ultimate cultural statement of individuality and innovative power against authority, and an ultimate statement (also) of rebellion. By granting extreme non-homogeneity to the work, which inheres not just superficially but profoundly within the works' confines, and raises the work to a level at which history must be brought into focus by the works' grandiosity (and I do mean grandiosity against mere novelty, as mere novelty is one quagmire built into century XX avant-gardism), the work situates itself within its own transcendent mode of visualization/realization. Authority instantly cringes at having its vestments and privileges (of, for instance, reduction and dilution of the gifted individual) stripped from it.

Century XX avant-gardism in America was very secretly invested in different forms of homogenization, up to and including complicity with authoritarian governments-- thus, its tendencies to de-emphasize, demean, and degrade formality and/or formal beauty, as transitive to something unique created from an atomized, individual consciousness. Furthermore, when theorists in the United States construct idea matrixes around, say, the English Romantics, the interrogation of "beauty" usually manifests a startling conclusion. "Beauty" is demeaned as a mode of traditionalism, conservatism, and the reactionary. Progressivism is made to fit a mold, third-world in nature, of a kind of cartoon, art transformed into a husk of anti-art imperatives, fulfilled by a nullification of the aesthetic. Whether they know it or not, post-modernists who endlessly reply, in only slightly different forms, **Duchamp's** urinal, give away their game easily. The game itself is, like not only Duchamp but the **Dadaists**, kill art, *kill the artist*.

It would, however, be rhetorically unfair not to give century XX credit for an enormous leap forward, where content and subject-matter in art are concerned. Owing to century XX advances, issues like queerness, women's rights, sexuality (including deviant sexuality) in all forms, drugs (including widespread circulation of drugs), urban life, and, for the literati, the nature and applique-interests of language itself, could come out of their respective closets and be dealt with frankly at least part of the time. The hub of this cultural frankness in the United States was New York City, specifically Manhattan. The difficulty continued to plague American art, however, of not being considered viable on a world level. Manhattan's bold, fearless frankness on one hand was an appreciable advance; yet by making it so that avant-garde American art, as emanated first from Manhattan, leaned on what might be called a *formless nonsense* approach, one hand threw out what the other might have gained. Where American art was concerned, a potential European audience laughed at painters who clearly could not paint, and writers who clearly could not write. An untalented cultural crew, who manifested Manhattan's famous "anti" aesthetic. The **Philly Free School**— specifically **Abby Heller-Burnham**— invests world-class formality with frank investigations of queer life. Now, the potential bold leap forward in narrative-thematic frankness can develop wings towards serious global travel; American art does not, with Philadelphia as the center, have to back-handedly undo itself.

That twentieth century avant-gardism (manifest, past Modernity, up to the present moment in the States, in post-modernity, multi-culturalism, and academic feminism) was secretly a game against formality, and/or formal beauty, and thus posited against an important component element of serious art— is what makes it so easy to dispense with. By emptying art of anything artistic, both avant-gardists and centrists proved themselves to be non-artists or "anti." They, thus, might as well have been government clerics or bureaucratic scripters— they were there, in art spaces, for the wrong reasons. This century, a gauntlet has already been laid down against these pedestrian structures, welcoming formality and/or formal beauty in high art back into the fold, understanding what put amateurism in place of giftedness and inverting things back to where they belong, for those engaged earnestly. This, I choose to call the **Neo-Romantic** (ushered in, on one literary side, by *post-avant*). Rebellion in century XX avant-gardism was faux-rebellion— more in cahoots with authoritarian impulses and destructive games than not— now, we stand ready to let our own, Neo-Romantic (intermittently **post-feministic**) version of prosody, its masterful manifestation and enactment, dictate terms to us about how we may cultivate any extreme form/manner of artistic individuality against the rest of the world (art-world or otherwise) which is not us. We thus make a potent political statement that there is room, in American society, for individuals to stand against the masses. This enables the realization of beauty, from individual narratives of form and (potentially deviant) passion, to become an event of some consequence for the whole of society at large. Manhattanite control shifting to Philadelphia is the key.

Post-Avant: A Meta-Narrative

(2010)

Some time during the summer of 2009, I initiated a discourse on my blog, *Stoning the Devil*. The object of this discourse was to give the term "**post-avant**" concrete significations. "Post-avant" is a term with a mysterious history and an unknown etymology. Up until the discourse, no one had demonstrated the initiative to fix the term in place. That it signified, in some sense, contemporary experimental poetry, was well known; what, specifically, made post-avant poetry post-avant (rather than, say, Language poetry or **Flarf**) was not known. Prior to the composition of this discourse (which was very much interactive, in a "blog," virtual context) I had devised a definition of post-avant; I called it "the diasporic movement of Language poetry towards a new synthesis with narrative and erotic elements." I still find this to be, on some levels, a viable definition, but a little top-heavy and academic to use in a blog context (where the patience of deliberate reading habits is only slowly becoming common, both for readers and writers.) The wedge I used into this discourse was something more like a sound-bite in the American press; I defined post-avant as "anything with an edge." I feel ambivalent about this move now— if "diasporic movement" was top-heavy and academic, "edge" was vague and too catch-all. But I forged ahead with "edge," and the discourse took off. Largely through links placed on a number of blogs, the discourse gained hundreds of readers, but generated mostly critical comments. What I would like to do in this essay is explore some pieces of the discourse that still seem interesting, in a context (print anthology) that encourages patient reading and serious, formalized commentary. In the end, I believe that the post-avant discourse is more intriguing for bits and pieces it generated than for what it told its audience about this amorphous entity, "post-avant," which has still yet to generate currency or a strong foot-hold among a wide number of poets.

One primary issue that got addressed in passing, and that I find interesting, is the issue of movement-titles: specifically, whether they are ciphers or not. Here is how I chose to address the issue in the blog discourse:

> Many people continue to complain that "post-avant," as a phrase, is meaningless, a cipher. I would not necessarily disagree that "post-avant," in and of itself, is a cipher, but I do not find this to be a problem…what does "post-modern," in and of itself, mean? Whatever comes after Modernism, whatever that happens to be? What about "Romanticism" or "Symbolism"?

In the heat of the moment, I neglected to mention poetry movements to which relevant appellations have been affixed, like **Objectivism** and **Surrealism**. Many people who commented had specific complaints about the term "post-avant"; that it is logically absurd, because it is impossible to be "post" whatever "avant" is. A more thoughtful take than the one I presented on my blog (or the responses my detractors offered) might walk a middle ground between these two responses; that literary appellations used to designate movements have a so-so success ratio, when measured in terms of their resonant power. It would be nice if self-conscious literary creators could aim for the upwards target, name their movements with a certain amount of caution and deliberation; but the lesson here may be that naming movements is generally a haphazard venture. Not everything that sticks, name-wise, sticks for a reason; the arbitrary nature of the signifier is applicant even in situations when (poets think) it should not be. Other issues that came up in the context of the discourse have even more rich complications, which will move us farther from post-avant and closer, I hope, to issues with more permanent relevance.

Here is a basic issue that came up repeatedly: to be an artist (rather than merely a poet) using poetry as a means of expression, how wide does one's frame of reference need to be; to put it in another (perhaps more positive) light, what is the maximum range potential for poets (by range, I mean diversified knowledge of the arts, as arts)? I brought this up online, and I bring it up again here, because I believe that poets over the last forty years have lost something. I specifically designate fifty years because fifty years roughly corresponds to the advent of post-modernism which, despite the cipher status of its common name, has revolutionized the world of the visual arts (including film) while poetry has (arguably, at least in its mainstream manifestations) remained virtually untouched. What have the manifestations been of post-modernism in the visual arts? In large measure, straightforward painting has been marginalized, in favor of videos, installations, and conceptual pieces. In this case, it is not so much the forms but the import of the forms that matters— in these works, visual artists have made strides towards new definitions of space, bodies, sexuality, language, history, and the contentious relationship of art and politics. The only major poetry movement of the past fifty years that can make similar claims is Language poetry— however, I have seen little acknowledgement among Language poets of what these visual artists have achieved. This is important because the visual artists (from Warhol to Nauman) were mining this terrain for 15-20 years before the Language poets emerged in cohesive form in the 1980s. Moreover, visual artists like **Warhol, Nauman**, and more contemporary artists like **Mike Kelley**, **Jeff Koons**, and **Paul McCarthy** have conquered the museums, galleries, and art-markets, while Language poetry remains barely acknowledged by mainstream poetry publishers, journals, and academies. In other words, the Language poets have been considerably less successful than the visual artists in disseminating their version of post-modernism, and were beat to the punch into the bargain. All this combines to give experimental poetry the look of a lag-behind. There are good reasons to support the notion that art-forms should not compete with each other. Nevertheless, the demarcations have become so pronounced that visual artists rarely even mention contemporary poetry. I (unabashedly) believe that this is a problem. It certainly cannot be rectified by one article, but it is an issue that deserves as much attention as any nascent poetry movement.

I am proud that the discourse touched on levels more fundamental than "frames of reference" and "maximum range potentials." I made the argument that two essential constituent elements of artistic process have a preponderant quality, which much experimental poetry has denied them: subjectivity and representation. Often, an emphasis has been placed on non-representational poetry, and the stance that manifestly subjective poetry imposes a kind of closure on poems-as-constructs. There is undoubtedly some truth to these positions, especially as regards mainstream verse, which tends to lean heavily on the subjectivity of poets as a perceived wellspring of universal wisdom. Representation becomes the tool by which this wisdom is revealed to the world. Dealing with poems that I called "post-avant" or "edgy" allowed me to open up the possibility that perhaps experimental poets have thrown out too much. Poets in this milieu tend to defend their aesthetic decisions by falling back on the tenets of Deconstructionism— that words, though arbitrary, are tactile and sensuous, capable of carrying the weight of poems, series of poems, and books, in and of themselves. I find this problematic, on several levels— firstly, because I do not enjoy engaging texts that preserve what I perceive to be myths about language (that the tactility of words is sufficient to justify a thematically, narratively, and affectively impoverished text); secondly, because contemporary experimental poets have failed to win a significant number of converts, either among the general public or among wide numbers of poets; thirdly, because new generations are rising up, that are looking for fresh perspectives and novel directions; as such, I would hope that rehashing the textual ethos of an earlier movement would not seem particularly interesting. **Roland Barthes** discusses the necessity of *bits* of narrative, *bits* of representation; as he says, "the text needs its shadow" (32)— the novels of **Robbe-Grillet** demonstrate how this can be done.

There are few post-modern poetry texts that raise possibilities of intermittent subjectivity and representation to the apotheosis that a text like *Jealousy* does, and all too often these texts are simply evacuated of any traces of humanity. They tend to be hermetic, and exceedingly prudish. There is a definite perversity to denying the preponderance of subjectivity and representation, and not necessarily an endearing perversity. The truth is straightforward: words not charged with at least traces of subjectivity and representational import, words which are *merely* tactile, generally hold little pleasure for most audiences.

Once it is acknowledged that subjectivity and representation are, in some senses, preponderant, questions arise as to *what* should be represented and *who* should be representing it. Much of the poetry

I was writing about is both overtly narrative and explicitly sexual— thus, I argued for post-avant as a movement with “sex at the center.” Central inclusion of sexuality in an art-movement seems so obvious in so many ways (sex having been at the center of most art-forms for the length of recorded history) that it may seem strange that I felt the need to argue for sex’s centrality. However, I feel that the new generation of experimental poets has been, in many senses, sanitized into frigidity by their teachers. So, like arguing that blinks should follow a poke in the eye, I argued for sex at the center of post-avant. The texts I used to posit this argument were ones like **Brooklyn Copeland’s** chapbook *Borrowed House*, which uses sex as one component part of a mosaic woven of desire, dark imagery, need for intimacy and impulses to confess (which never quite shade into the melodramatic bathos of Confessionalism.) The rag and bone shop of the heart that **Yeats** wrote of has all the durability and permanence (not to mention tactility) of words, with the added bonus that affect, sexuality, and their representations are *not* arbitrary. They are born out of lived experience, which is (willy-nilly) as preponderant as subjectivity and representation. “Write what you know” is a pretty hoary cliché— nevertheless, like most clichés, there is a grain of truth to it. Writing what you know does not necessitate the impartation of universal wisdom, or even an attempt to do so— we can know disjuncture, ellipse, torqued forms of narrativity— but it does presuppose the preponderance of subjectivity, that I continue to argue for. Hard as it is to believe, all these home-truths (some of which border, admittedly, on platitudes) have not been spoken in an experimental poetry context in decades. In earlier contexts, they would have all the surprise of a tautology or axiom; in 2010, I hope they may be relevant, even revelatory. All these are the *what*; as to the *who*, it is my conviction that any poet (male or female) should be able to write as much about sex as they wish. The only ideology that is useful for an artist is one of complete freedom. Special interest groups want political correctness; artists (and I do not mean to romanticize the status of artists) know that there is no “correctness” in politics or anywhere else. Correctness is relative, and “correct” for an artist is whatever forms conform to the myriad shapes of subjectivities that can be manifested in text.

The problem, as I see it, is that most poets currently writing in the English language approach poetry in a way consonant with what I call minor artist strategies. They let their texts be dictated by little rule books and primers they carry around; everything must be defined, everything must be spelled out. Approaches to representation and its sword-carrier, narrative, are decided beforehand; and those that do away with narrative do away with thematics into the bargain. Who wants to read poetry with no themes? Those who willfully obfuscate away from narrative build little but obsolescence into their poems. Likewise, those who take a hackneyed approach to narrative guarantee that their poems can be of no continuing interest, as invention is effaced from their discipline. That rare middle ground, where narrative approaches are concerned, in which invention is met by discipline, and old themes are endlessly refreshed, is only accessible to those who approach poetry like the major high art form it is. “Post-avant,” as I have defined it, is an ideal; it occupies the space wherein that rare middle ground approach to representation can be occupied and reoccupied. These issues may be pertinent to anyone who feels that the second half of century XX saw too much taken away too fast from English language poetry; and who want to see vistas open up that can lead our poetry back to the safety of danger, the middle ground of extremes, and the timeliness of permanence.

Pleasures of the Post-Avant Text

(2006)

Much post-avant poetry adheres to the dictum prescribed by **William Wordsworth** in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that works of art (poetic or otherwise) be *purposeful*. More often than not, post-avant poems bear the weight of strong moral, political, social, and aesthetic convictions as to what constitutes responsibly forward-thinking poesy. Convictions create purpose, purpose creates structure, and structure creates meaning. A nexus of interrelationships is created wherein conviction, purpose, structure and meaning cleave together, chafe, or work out a kind of text-driven bargain. Part of this bargain must be the consideration of an assumed audience, who may or may not share the convictions that inform the poem's sensibility. The poem, if it is to skirt the abyss of solipsism, must enact a "reaching out," whether through purely formal or other constitutive elements. It must give pleasure, whether the pleasure is built into the poem's structure (i.e. through melopoeic craftsmanship, heightened/poetic diction, etc.) or if it resides in the implicit or explicit convictions that inform the poem's "purposeful" ethos. Thus, fully realized post-avant poetry can lay claim to a greater *completeness* (beyond considerations of purpose) than most other forms of poetry, as the ambition (to fulfill conviction, purpose, structure, meaning, and the poetic pleasure principle) is extensive and unsparing. Conviction-purpose-structure-meaning enacted is inherently *avant.*

Yet pleasure is, has been, and may always be the hardest part of the "text-driven bargain" for post-avant poetry to fulfill. This remains so because often the conviction driving the text is that conventional pleasure-giving forms and characterizations (the "epiphanic I," the poet-as-universal-truth bearer, etc.) must be subverted, re-contextualized, or done away with all together. The post-avant poem is as much a reaction against something as it is a movement towards an imagined ideal (and, ironically, "imagined ideals" are often being rebelled against too). So how does pleasure get into the text? Where does the "text-driven bargain" stop, and the joy of "pure textuality" infuse the work? Obviously, a simple answer would be inappropriate. It may be instructive, however, to look at a sample from the work of **Rae Armantrout,** a leading post-avant poet whose constructs successfully and somewhat miraculously manage to fulfill all parts of post-avant's text-driven bargain without sacrificing one ounce of pure pleasure, for those willing to *dig* with her. Dig for convictions, moving down the line towards meaning.

Armantrout achieves her textual balance through a kind of ambivalent eroticism. That is, her poems "tease" the reader with flashes of narrative and representational imagery, then withdraw before a complete narrative or representational enactment is shown. Armantrout's procedure brings to mind a passage from **Roland Barthes'** *The Pleasure of the Text*, which I quote here in part:

"it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly
stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin
flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers
and sweater), between two edges (the open-
necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is
this flash itself which seduces, or rather:
the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance."

"Intermittence", in the context of a discursive analysis of Armantrout's work, would refer to the elements that are overt and assumed as "givens" in Centrist poetry: narrative, characterization, imagery, candor, emotional resonances, mythological or other kinds of metaphor, elevated diction, controlled syntax, etc. Armantrout offers "shadows," "hints," "flashes" of these things, and the pleasure we take from her poems is the novel combinations she creates, in what might be called "shadow plays." These entail formal and thematic elements vying for center stage, only to find that the poem's "center" is precisely a "no-center."

This isn't to imply a lack of focus, but that the focus is on creating a series of signifiers and "signifying hints" that leave the field fundamentally open for myriad interpretations, rather than "closing" the text

through “prompts” that more or less tell us what to think and feel about it (a common syndrome in Centrist work). A prime example would be *Precedence*, title poem of a book released in 1985:

“The dead boy
was found
clasping, “wrapped around”
a tree,
one chosen in a
roiling wilderness,
the urgent dream
where love gives way to rescue.
Or rescue to love.”

What is the “shadow play” being enacted here? How and why is pleasure given? Rather than try and “close” the text by offering an authoritative interpretation, it might be better simply to offer a few interpretative vistas down which a reader may wander. Armantrout drops in the narrative hint or shadow quickly, without much fuss. A vignette is presented which at first glance seems commonplace: a dead boy, a hint of the pastoral. What seems “closed,” however, quickly opens up, owing to a sort of Surrealist jolt that arrives when we realize how unusual it would be for a corpse to be “wrapped around” a tree. Thus, we get representation, but it is skewered and inconclusive, and the narrative “wrapped around” the representational imagery seems equally inconclusive.

The pleasure in this scenario resides, in part, in noticing how much information Armantrout packs into a very few words, how a “text-efficacy” is achieved seemingly without strain and with complete control. Everything in this poem is “appearance-as-disappearance”: the boy, the tree, the dream. All are subject to the same skewered sensibility, further enhanced (and also complicated) by the poem’s title: “Precedence”. What, exactly, does this poem precede, and what precedes this poem? One could take the stance that the boy in the poem is a metaphor for the atomized, isolated, autonomous Romantic verse-maker (certainly, on one level, a precedent to today’s post-avantist) “dying of love”. On a slight tangent to this would be an interpretation of the poem as an answer to **Keats’** *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, which also involves a young man, a “roiling wilderness”, an “urgent dream”, and the death of love. If one looks at the substantive elements of the poem’s structure (boy, tree, wilderness, dream, love, rescue), they do seem very Romantic. But, of course, this is an implied third person narrative, rather than a first person narrative, which would be the Romantic convention (just as a side note, it is interesting to remember that Keats’ poem is also slightly skewered, in the sense that it veers from a second to a first person narrative focus). Furthermore, Armantrout is fastidiously careful to offer nothing “personal” as such, but only glimpses of an “anti-visionary vision” (i.e. a dreamscape unburdened with idealizations, sentiments, or any other signifiers of poetic epiphany). Thus, the poem could be a critique of the Romantic, an allegory of the limitations of the Romantic, or a loving remembrance of a bygone (“preceding”) era. It could also be a hundred other things; the aesthetic at work here seems utterly “meta” (i.e. inhabiting many different levels simultaneously, including a possible self-referential one). The piece is structured to produce a plethora of meanings.

It is interesting to note that the designations we use for Armantrout’s sensibility (skewered, inconclusive, anti-visionary, impersonal, etc.) don’t seem conventionally “attractive,”, or likely to give pleasure in the normative poetic/poetical fashion. For Roland Barthes, “perversion…is the realm of textual pleasure”, and indeed it would seem that the composition and enjoyment of this poem could be a “collaboration in perversity.” In other words, our pleasure here is an unusual kind of pleasure: the pleasure of accesses only half-granted, “intermittence” elevated from the physically arousing to the intellectual arousals of art. We remember that the victim presented in *Precedence* is a boy, not a man; is this child (that, perhaps, wants “full access,” “wholesome” pleasure) a part of our nature that has to die for us to grow up? Is this the last gasp of the Romantic hero wryly satirized? For those engaged in the purposeful struggle against cliché, complacency, orthodoxy, and catechistic worship of old tropes, these are deeply pleasurable questions, engaging as they do our convictions, purposes, structures, and meanings. “Precedence” can be seen from many angles, this is just one; nevertheless, it is an angle in which much remains to approach, handle, examine, and savor.

Sex and Shadows: Plumbing the Depths

(2009-2026)

The poems I would like to explore belong to Boston's **Mary Walker Graham**. Many of Graham's poems adopt the tonal posture that the protagonist is either a violated victim, or is caught in the throes of self-castigation; veer, also, towards the straight Confessional, but always with an added dimension and depth (imaginative capacity) which places her (to my eyes) squarely within the confines of post-avant. The textual edge being coasted along explores the idea that women in poetry should develop the right to plumb the depths of sexuality all the way through, thus fulfilling the archetypal promise of the Creatrix. This, against the confines of the avant-garde— specifically, post-modernity, multi-culturalism, and academic feminism— which tend to cramp expressions of sex and sexuality, and establish chaste sexual models. The following is a prose poem, entitled *A Pit, A Broken Jaw, A Fever*:

When I say pit, I'm thinking of a peach's. As in James and the Giant, as in: the night has many things for a girl to imagine. The way the flesh of the peach can never be extricated, but clings— the fingers follow the juice. The tongue proceeds along the groove. Dark peach: become a night cavern— an ocean's inside us— a balloon for traveling over. When I said galleons of strong arms without heads, I meant natives, ancient. I meant it takes me a long time to get past the hands of men; I can barely get to their elbows. How a twin bed can become an anchor. How a balloon floating up the stairwell can become a person. Across the sea of the hallway then, I floated. I hung to the fluorescent fixtures in the bathroom, I saw a decapitated head on the toilet. I'll do anything to keep from going in there. I only find the magazines under the mattress, the Vaseline in the headboard cabinet. A thought so hot you can't touch it. A pit. A broken jaw. A fever.

This poem oozes creepiness. Among the aspects I find most notable: the way that Graham's protagonist self-infantilizes (regarding herself not as a woman but as a "girl"), the imagery that conflates the sexual with the horrific (Vaseline butting against a decapitated head, broken jaws, fevers), and the intimation that what is at the heart of this confrontation is some sort of compulsive relationship. Yet the poem is intriguing because, despite its intimations, it never abandons the first-person singular. Whomever the "you" happens to be, we never see them, they are never addressed, and the poem posits no "Other." There is solipsism at work, which cuts the implied "you" down to size; the narrator may be involved in an unhealthy relationship, but the primary feeling we get is one of self-loathing and self-disgust, expressed with compelling (and disturbing) intensity. The generalized phrases, addressed to men, serve to illustrate, as is Graham's wont, the narrator's alienation from whatever specific man is sewn into the situation, interior and exterior. All move forward from a sense of entitlement-in-text to enact scenes from the depths of the female sexual interior.

Indeed: everything about the subject's relationship, both to coitus and to responses to coitus, is posited along axis structures of attraction and repulsion, a push-pull edge that narrativizes how the subject experiences passion. That the affect emanation is dark and dour also creates an axis of attraction and repulsion for the reader, who may choose to engage or disengage, based on temperament, and the principle of fascination, sexual and/or textual, being stimulated or not. Form vacillates between poetry and prose, strictures and freedom, uneasily.

There is also an unlikely quality to Graham's metaphors: what exactly could "balloon" imply, in this context? How can it be connected to the "peach" that Graham puts it up against? At one point, Graham creates a metaphoric chain, all meant to represent the same thing: *dark peach, night cavern, ocean, balloon*. The most obvious interpretation is that the metaphor is meant to signify the female sexual organ. However, the metaphoric chain is distorted, phantasmagoric, and macabre. A stretch is required to allow the metaphoric chain to work, just as Graham stretches to convey what she wants to convey, which is equally brutal and surreal, and supports a consistent persona. The following poem, *Double*, first appeared in ***Ocho #11,*** and works an analogous angle:

Here is a box of fish marked tragedy.

Is it different from the dream

in which your alter ego kills the girl?
You are the same, and everyone knows it,

whether tracing the delicate lip of the oyster shell,
or sharpening your blade in the train car.

The marvelous glint is the same.
Though you think you sleep, you wake

and walk into the hospital, fingering
each instrument, opening each case with care.

The scales fall away with a scraping motion.
You are the surgeon and you are the girl.

Whether you lie like feathers on the pavement,
or coolly pocket your equipment, and walk away...

You are the same; and you are the same.
You only sleep to enter the luminous cave.

I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that this poem places itself in an introspective realm of infantile sexuality. Yet that it is written from an adult perspective gives it a kind of double edge. If there is terror here, it is terror of the protagonist's own sexual power. The interest and pleasure for the reader is in trying to understand the different levels of self-evaluation that are going on, and how they affix to the narrator's sense of herself— how her persona, made tactile, is constructed. As in *A Pit*, there is a level of sexual solipsism inhering in the protagonist which becomes a maze, in and of itself. There is also a level on which the poem exteriorizes its own discomfort through the use of "gross" imagery: box(es) of fish, blades, surgeons. What is the nature of the operation? What necessitates it?

Reversing *A Pit*, the poem is given added depth because it is presented in the second person: not "I" but "you." It takes on the quality of a narrator talking to herself about herself, and makes the poem an exercise in imaginative self-consciousness, more so than *A Pit*. I find this admirable because it recuperates the tone of Confessional poetry, yet puts it through a new, more full-bodied, if brutish, kind of synesthetic light filter. What Graham sees as "Double" could be a split between her body and her mind, or between her sexuality and her intellect, or even between herself and another. Whatever it is, it has left her in pieces, and the poem seems to be an attempt, assuming textual entitlement, to reassemble herself. Both of these poems, and other Graham work, present a consistent persona, a tangent to **Stacy Blair's***: a polymorphously perverse girl-woman lost in the never-land of her own body* (and polymorphously perverse can imply a body of thoughts and ideas in addition to the mere physical mechanism.) Though possibly mainstream-consonant, as has been duly noted, through usage of conventional narrative techniques, and exploration of familiar emotions, it would be difficult to get more edgy, in the parlance of this discourse, than that. Like painter **Jenny Kanzler**, Graham torques the Creatrix archetype in on itself, so that narratives of passion become narratives of purgation, yogic exercises to make metaphors.

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With **Stacy Blair**, a Midwestern poetess, there is more to see and say about the pertinent issues hewn into these texts— the creation of a new kind of female persona in American poetry; a new, more thoroughgoing approach to female sexuality and the female body; and a continuing, obsessive interest in the dark or shaded portion of both sexual and human reality. Stacy Blair's insignia piece is called *Photo Experiments*:

Blonde locks jut out over the tops of pigtails,
bleached beach/sand-color by the sun.

Time's short between this photograph and my regard.
Picture: no flower lays or shoes, just
young grass hips. She is, I am, we were,
very young. The entire page of this album
flanks history; under my mind, another
helpless time explosion. I was, we were, are,
naked newborn, as our little limbs on film.

What might strike the reader as most urgent thematically— the artful insinuation of pregnancy— is buttressed by the same strain of self-castigation, self-reproach, and self-mistrust we find in Graham. Like Graham, "young grass hips," "flanks," and "flower lays" are all heavy innuendo about carnality. What makes the poem so fascinating are the divisions and precisions Blair incises into her perceptions of identity— who she was, who she is now as two distinct selves; who she is and who her assumed lover is, also as two distinct selves; and the third entity they create together (possibly the unborn child) being distinct from them as another gestalt entity. It is difficult not to read "helpless time explosion" specifically as a reference to pregnancy— and equally gripping, because addressed, text-wise, with taut, terse authority. The phrase narrativizes, also, the attraction/repulsion dynamic at the heart of issues being explored, and/or processed through purgation. The body's helplessness redeems itself in the yogic tension-release incised into fulfilled textuality. Caesuras here create a sense of hypnosis for the reader, brief incantation become a formal edge. The poem ends in irresolution, purposefully— and the chiaroscuro edge (or edges) of what I called post-avant many years ago is very much in effect, on display. Why the Aughts created this sense of dread, of foreboding, along with the shadowy seductiveness of stark eroticism, is anyone's guess; a reaction, perhaps, to the stunted quality of the female body (and the female brain in response) in century XX art?

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For **Becky Hilliker**, narrativization opens a vista slightly more expansive than for Graham and Blair. Her insignia poem *Catch* takes the tropes of both the broadly sexual and the construction-of-persona from the sexual and makes significations resonate towards something, plumbed depths, more primordial, about essence and disappearance:

The wind turns the water into an animal
and the boat rides the back of swells,
bucking wetly.
My legs absorb the push and pull,
thinking only of the fish,
sleek and dripping on the line,
neon green parachute ballooning
from its mouth.

I arch my back
and the rod dives.
The fish lifts, slimy as an egg,
spinning like a ballerina
on a silver thread,
its marble eye mute,
fixed on white.

How many times
did you find this world,
blinded, terrified?
There are hands on you
and pliers in your mouth,
metallic, blood-washed.
How many times have you waited
for the water
while everything lurches around you,

brilliant white, like the inside
of a hospital, like the underbelly
of a dream, gasping
to break the surface
toward that cold & sudden light?

Like Mary Walker Graham, the yogic affecting of catharsis through sexualization of metaphor and imagery is prominent. Phrases like “bucking wetly,” “I arch my back,” “the rod dives,” all generate the impression that Graham is present as a companion and influence (both poetesses are affiliated with Boston). However, the final stanza finds Hilliker taking Creatrix energy to a sense of metaphoric identification, past the strictly sexual. Hilliker transubstantiates into a sense of becoming her own “Catch,” and both the chain of similes and resolution that develop from this textually enact themselves in a fevered narrativization of original passion, passion being born. Death/birth, as a dynamic, is assayed as the poetess’s seminal passion manifests from a vision of her own death-throes. The phenomenological non-constraint of no-boundaries register’s Hilliker’s consciousness a possessed one, as inside/outside tactile realities merge seamlessly in language hurled from the inside of one movement, one thrust, one ejaculation.

Indeed, the sense of textual crescendo built into *Catch* is admirable. It takes significations which for the reader could remain static and whirls them around into a dynamic context. Moreover, because the crescendo is built from the portion of the piece, past sexuality, into the idea of the original, the generative, and the ultimate similarity of birth and death (as yogic exercises involve generation and release of tensions from wellsprings of birth/death energies in the body), Hilliker employs sexualized imagery to dig deeper, into the phenomenology of origins, than Graham does. Hilliker is her own prey—which is to say, she registers herself, as a construct, originating from a double, a second form, of what could be taken as something homely she sees before her. That narrative of form built into *Catch* is about a textual reality more clipped, terse, staccato than Graham and Blair. The sense that the poem harnesses its resources towards a blinding sense of linguistic release at its conclusion, in a parallel structure with two similes (“like the inside/ of a hospital,” “like the underbelly/of a dream”), makes it a more tense, herky-jerky, less steady ride than most of Mary Walker Graham’s material. A matter of aesthetic preference, whether the measured quality of Graham’s prosody or Hilliker’s leaps and jolts generate pleasure, fascination. Even if it is dark-toned music.

On a general note: there is nothing new, necessarily, about narratives of form and passion. If the congeries of elements which make up that signification now deserve emphasis, around the idea of the Creatrix, it is because the Aughts saw the development, in the United States, of a number of female artists for whom form and passion were absolutely relevant. This, rather than a conceptual or theoretical bias, drawn from political or feminist ideologies, or assaying of cultural critiques. Neo-Romanticism, as I define it, and as is seen in Graham, Blair, and Hilliker, takes its roots in the consciousness of the individual. The development of individual and individualized concerns, perceptions, even neuroses, then constitutes the progress towards the enlightenment of engaged artistic expression. If this is all true, what the States has seen from post-modernity, multi-culturalism, and academic feminism, become inadequate to address the concerns of poets like Graham, Blair, and Hilliker. A new set of terms, and theoretical framework, is needed.

Elucidating Derrida and Difference: Lecture given at Temple University

(2006-2025)

"We provisionally give the name "difference" to this sameness which is not identical."

Derrida's concept "differance" has its basis in contradiction. What Derrida is essentially "doing," though he might balk at the notion that formulating "differance" could be "doing" anything, is moving Saussure's theories of language into an expanded realm, that might be said to include the ontological, or the metaphysical, or both (or neither.) As we remember, **Saussure**, in founding Structuralism with his *Course in General Linguistics*, posited that "in languages there are only differences," i.e. all phonemes and other elements of language take their identity from all other phonemes and language elements, and are defined relationally rather than individually. Derrida is telling us that in naming "differance" through a displacement of "e" to "a", he is, among other things, broadening the parameters of Saussure's insight beyond language and linguistic signs. The play of differences, Derrida tells us, is operational in every human sphere, and in all situations in which entities/substances/essences are perceived or intuited. All things are perceived and identified through the principle of "difference," i.e. all things take their meaning (in the broadest sense) from other things from which they differ. By taking Saussure's theory out of linguistics and casting it in a more expansive light, Derrida posits a "relative universe" in which individual identity, as "owned" by a constitutive and constituting subject, becomes problematic as it is seen that identity is structured out of "difference," plays of difference.

Derrida's use of the word "provisionally" is important. It signifies a temporary condition, an impermanent usage. This sets Derrida apart from earlier philosophers, like **Nietzsche** and **Heidegger**, who were much more definite and authoritative in their pronouncements. The conditions by which post-Structural thought was created entailed a radical rethinking of writing, the author, authority, and "privilege," so that once the individual, with his/her constitutive ego, was reduced by "differance" to a sort of "liminal limbo," the act of writing, creating signs, and setting forth a specific "play of differences" became fraught with all sorts of complications and limitations that made every claim "provisional." If not just language but people exist in a "play of differences", and if this state is marked out by a permanent condition of "difference," then how can any given "person" (and person does, in this context, need quotation marks) claim to use linguistic signs with authority? "Differance" is operative on people, and on language too, so that when a person attempts to use language instrumentally, a "double bind" inevitably and invariably arises. Even naming this bind is a double bind, or maybe a triple bind; the constitutive subject, the linguistic sign, and the anti-concept/anti-word "differance" all chafe against an attempted "stranglehold by definition" in linguistic signage. Thus, the language of qualification becomes imperative. Derrida cannot strangle "differance" into submission; it is too evanescent, too ungraspable; he must talk "around" it, and everything he says must be qualified and guarded against facile usage that guarantees misunderstanding. In fact, any claim to completely grasp "differance" would, to Derrida, seem fraudulent, because there is nothing to grasp, or a mere phantom. "Differance" exists, or has its being, or its "charged non-existence," in a crepuscular wilderness of shadows. If Derrida is to use language instrumentally, his strategy (and Derrida emphasizes in this article the importance of strategy and risk when dealing with "differance") must be equivocation. It is not that "differance" is ineffable, but that once it is signified, it ceases to be visible. To use a quote from **Wittgenstein**, it cannot be "said," it may only, possibly, be "shown." Although, to be fair, it cannot really be shown either, as it may lie beyond our capacity for understanding. Thus, equivocation becomes the only means by which Derrida can avoid falling into the traps of authoritatively secure language, which is seen, ultimately, to be anything but secure. Equivocation is also the best way to deal with a "sameness which is not identical," i.e. a process and a quality that are omnipresent where being, beings, and forms of communication persist, but which takes its expression through both the individual properties of any given entity and properties (or concepts or signs) shared between entities.

"Differance is neither a word nor a concept."

This gets to the heart of the matter, and, revealingly, the heart of the matter turns out to be a negative proposition. A fundamental duality within "differance" reveals itself, in that Derrida has created a word which he claims is not a word. Either this is a rhetorical sleight-of-hand, or Derrida is once again

equivocating against authorial authority, his own constitutive subject-ness, and the signifying confines of language perpetually caught in a synchronic (and, for many readers, hermeneutic) circle. If nothing else, Derrida can be said to be consciously moving a piece on Saussure's chess-board. It might even be more accurate to say that he is stealing a piece, and in fact Derrida does at one point in this article use the analogy of a king about to be killed. "Differance" is seen to be not a word because Derrida posits "differance" as what happens *between* words. That is, "differance" is the play of differences by which words and phonemes define themselves, but because it is impossible to define this "play" without tautologically referring back to it, "difference," in the negative space where it finds its definition, cannot be signified. Yet, for Derrida to lay this particular card on the table, it *must* be signified. We see that Derrida is playing the "sign-game" with the not-fortuitous and irrevocable knowledge that no victory is possible. If "differance" had to be defined and given "entity-status," we would call it a "negative entity." Just as words, things, and people cannot exist or subsist without other words, things, and people, "differance" has no positive existence (or Derrida might say, no existence at all) outside the context of a world inhabited by contingencies and contingent beings. Were Derrida to authoritatively call "differance" a word, he would be claiming for it the kind of pawn-on-the-chessboard existence that Saussure posits for words within his schema of the word-as-sign.

Saussure, we remember, claims that words consist of the signifier, a sound image, and the signified, a concept. Once "differance" leaves the negative space where it belongs and becomes a sound-image, among thousands of other sound-images, it is no longer "difference." "Differance" itself, as a sound-image, becomes something on which "differance" acts, from a place outside of "difference." As nothing can act on itself from outside of itself, this is a logical absurdity. Derrida feels doubly absurd about this, as he is the one forcing "differance" to act on "differance" from outside itself, by naming it. So, Derrida only feels comfortable in the authoritative role when he puts forth something he knows is contradictory, and, possibly, absurd.

Were Derrida a strict Saussurian and nothing else, he might feel settled about positing "concept status" for "difference." After all, an unnamed concept that is "talked around" still might avoid the play of differences that Saussure enumerates in language. However, because Derrida is not merely following Saussure's precepts but radically extending them, and because this extension takes Saussure's claims for language and applies them to many other things, we see that differance-as-concept is no more or less absurd than differance-as-sign. Derrida sees that concepts, like linguistic signs, are acted upon by differance, defined by what they have or lack in relation to other concepts. If differance were a concept, we would again see the logical absurdity of differance acting on differance from outside itself. Thus, on a theoretical level (differance-as-concept), as well as on a material one (differance-as-sign), Derrida is forced by the difficulty of his construct to hedge bets. Differance must be both a sound-image and a concept, and a non-sound-image and a non-concept. In both states of being, positive and negative, differance has no identity other than that of a differentiating phantom.

"Differance indicates closure of presence, effected in functioning of traces."

Things present themselves to us, generally and initially, as discrete totalities. If we read a poem by **Baudelaire**, we (hopefully) focus our attention on it, to the exclusion of all other things. The poem grips us as we gradually apprehend its totality. We might read it once, twice, or three times. It is present to us, becomes our present moment within a surfeit of our attention. During this time-period, we do not think relationally about the poem. It is simply there, in front of us, a series of linguistic signs conspiring to present an impression of discreet totality-within-presence. However, the discreet totality of a poem by Baudelaire, or any work of art, or anything that rivets our attention, is eventually and inevitably mediated by differance. "Differance" indicates the "closure of presence" because when it begins to infiltrate our perceptions, we notice "traces," parts of whatever we happen to be perceiving, which remind us that the perceived totality of our object is in fact an illusion, and that what we perceive exists, as all things do, only relationally. If we happen to be reading a poem, we think of other poems, other poets, other times we have seen words used in the poem in other places, etc. Once this process begins, our object ceases to be "present" to us, and the energy that constitutes "present encounters" dissipates and diffuses. "Traces" are important for Derrida because they are a constant reminder of "difference," and that "presence" as such is easily closed in a relational, differentially-aware consciousness. "Traces" are perceived differently by different people, but the process by which traces "close presence" (i.e. the way we notice traces of things in other things, traces of words in other words, etc.) is consistent.

Simply put, we do not perceive things individually. Everything that is perceived by us leads us to perceptions that mediate initial impressions, which continue to be mediated for as long as we perceive a given object. The process of mediation is internal, and means that when it begins (and it begins almost immediately), the object perceived is no longer wholly present to us. “Differance” thus distorts (though a less pejorative term like “mediates” might do just as well) our contact with things, diffuses our ability to focus. When we are not “present” for the objects we perceive, when “traces” lead us to think relationally about objects, we have entered the “ghost-world” wherein “differance” exerts sovereign influence and where subjectivity is lost in shadows. It leads us out of the present, and we see that when Derrida brings in a spatio-temporal dimension to the discussion of “difference,” this is partly where he is leading us. For Derrida, “differance” places things in time, because where we are in time has to do with our “relational state,” how we are placed in relation to other things, how we and the world around us are “sequenced.”

“Signification: differance of temporalizing”

In this way, Derrida demonstrates that signification is a way of creating a sense of time passing. When we talk, we talk “in time,” as a way of “marking time,” i.e. summarizing “states of affairs” as they exist in a moment, or, depending on the context, many moments. We are able to demarcate, with linguistic signs, what “now” is and consists of, what “then” was and consisted of, etc. It is primarily through language, and other forms of signification, Derrida argues, that we are able to do this. Things that we place with linguistic signs are always placed “in time,” so to speak, and so the play of differences as they exist between moments are expressed in language. Again, a “meta” dimension creeps into Derrida’s thinking; the constitutive subject, the dialect, and the moment being expressed are subject to “differance” simultaneously and on both similar and different levels; thus, our attempts to place states of affairs in time are mediated by the play of differences in language and in the constitutive subject as well. Every human utterance is “timed”; it takes a certain amount of forethought to plan and a certain amount of time to say or write. What is expressed in speaking or writing is the creation of a moment among moments, a statement among statements, possibly a summation among summations. There is no way to escape the relativity and contingency of a world bound every which way by differance. Now that Saussure has been moved out of the confines of language and into the broader realities of space and time, we see that “in language there are only differences” might become “in the world of perceptible reality there are only differences.” If this is acknowledged and accepted as fact, it is easy to see why post-Structuralism and Deconstructionism would argue against the belief in the reality of a discreet, closed, unmediated subjectivity.

On the other hand, the very act of “accepting” a philosophical precept as fact becomes in and of itself problematic. Facts are closed entities, or are held as such by the constitutive subject. “Differance”, ghost though it may be, seems to open things up so that the very act of accepting it as a fact, or even calling it “it,” would belie Derrida’s intention. Because Derrida must equivocate, because “differance” is seen to be neither a word nor a concept, Derrida might’ve known that “intention”, as such, did not apply to his concept. “Intention” implies the kind of constitutive, authoritative self-hood that Derrida is negating. It is an irony that “differance” seems to have been no less confounding to its creator than it remains to us today. This probably accounts for Derrida’s admission in this piece that differance is a “difficult, confusing” concept. If in the perceptible world there are only differences, and if this applies to language as part of the perceptible world, and also to any constitutive subject, we are forced to recognize the nothingness, or near-nothingness, of human perception and hence human will. “Differance” may be seen as a ghost or a kind of haunting, a binding which no one and nothing can undo. On the other hand, a more positive reading of “differance” might say that it is a mode of spiritual development, of getting beyond the confines of ego and subjectivity and into a more realistic realm, albeit one mediated by a ghost. It would be nice to conclude with a definitive statement, but that would seem inappropriate to this text. All that remains is to place this moment in time through language, and so, with apologies for any authoritative utterance, I end here.

Adam Fieled, October 16, 2006

Ephemera: beginning the work

(2025)

Works of art function, on a cultural level, as both message-carriers and symbolic talismans. To the extent that the intentions of the artist are taken seriously, the artist him or herself becomes a message-carrier and a symbolic talisman. This is the art-function that forms the basis for the study of artists and works of art as semiology. Yet, in framing a work of art, criticism always presents a **de Man-ian** crisis situation, which brings to light an issue, which, unsatisfyingly, lacks objectivity, but is compellingly magnetic enough to be irresistible (to some) nonetheless. This is the issue of *perfection*. There cannot be, objectively, a perfect work of art, but the critical brain nonetheless may be compelled at any moment to have recourse to a perceived *perfection* inhering in a work of art. That criticism and crisis can be objective, a reaction to an existing situation or context, or subjectivist, a personal stream of consciousness following or developing from close, patient study of cultural products, is taken for granted. When I begin to contemplate the years I have spent studying *Ephemera*, an early poem by early Mod or Edwardian poet **William Butler Yeats**, I understand that the crisis latent in the poem for me was slow to materialize. But materialize it did, and now, in 2025, in the mode of *crisis*, the issue forces its hand. Could it be that *Ephemera* is the most perfect poem in the English language? If this is acknowledged as at least a possibility, could we extrapolate from said possibility that Yeats takes a vaunted place above the major Romantics and **Milton**, superior to them in allegiance to textual intensity, dramatic sweep, and symbolic weight?

The poem itself must take the floor and speak for itself. Worth noting that *Ephemera* is not seen to be in the first tier of Yeats' oeuvre. How this is possible is simple: it lacks the representationally bardic stance which is seen, critically, to lend Yeats his largesse. The modesty in the poem, however, inhering on a surface bereft of seeming socio-historical import (often the stock-in-trade of Yeats' first tier) in favor of a small incident or situation, is balanced by a surfeit of semantic, and imagistic, gorgeousness. An apogee, as it were, of the pure and purely aesthetic. Apogee, also, suggesting the *perfection* bardic postures often miss:

"Your eyes, that once were never weary of mine,
are bowed in sorrow under pendulous lids,
because our love is waning."

And then she:
"Although our love is waning, let us stand
by the lone border of the lake once more,
together in that hour of gentleness
when the poor, tired child, Passion, falls asleep:
how far away the stars seem, and how far
is our first kiss, and ah, how old my heart!"

Pensive, they paced along the faded leaves,
while, slowly, he whose hand held hers replied:
"Passion has often worn our wandering hearts."

The woods were round them, and the yellow leaves
fell like faint meteors in the gloom, and once
a rabbit, old and lame, limped down the path;
Autumn was over him: and now they stood
on the lone border of the lake once more:
turning, he saw that she had thrust dead leaves,
gathered in silence, dewy as her eyes,
in bosom and hair.

"Ah, do not mourn," he said,
"that we are tired, for other loves await us;

hate on and love through unrepining hours.
Before us lies eternity; our souls
are love, and a continual farewell."

The formal component of *Ephemera* which most distinguishes itself is that it is free verse. As was the case when *Ephemera* was written (1889), perfection in English-language poetry without end-rhyme (or at least the sturdiness, strictures of blank verse) was unthinkable. Yet never, in said English language, have assonance and alliteration so accomplished the yeoman's task of making the piece shudder, oscillate, scintillate, resonate as they do here. The third stanza ("Pensive…hearts") is a foray into a mysticism of the English language which mirrors all the signified mysticisms in the *mise en scene,* built into the exquisitely represented landscape. Close reading, however, in the manner of the **New Critics**, can only take us so far here. It is enough to know that the line-by-line reality of the piece subsists on a level of extremely tautened dynamic tension. The two lovers stand, and walk, but never sit; that establishes the physiology of the poem tautened, taken care of. They also seem to inquire of the woods and the lake whether their shared assumption, of also shared obsolescence, is correct. A felt, affirmative answer closes the circular paths they walk. The dialogue could be taken as mannered. If I do not take it that way, it is because the physiological tension built into the piece renders the dialogue more potent, more raw. Physiological tension, also, missing, it might be said, in the effete languidness of *Adam's Curse*. Which, of course, is higher placed in Yeats' oeuvre, and bears some similarity to *Ephemera*. The next inquiry closes our own circle back to the idea, quixotic or not, of *perfection*. The mirroring physiology of the reader most closely attuned to *Ephemera*— why is there something perfect here, in 2025? Yeats' brief sojourn into free-verse crushes the life out of what has been written in the English language since 1889— yet the form of the piece seems beamed to him, in mystical Yeats-ian fashion, from a race whose prescience as regards 2025 was razor sharp. Yeats speaks to us now, today. *Ephemera* becomes a backwards, forwards moving warp from 1889, and the sense of a time and matter consuming warp is what reaches us, on a wavelength immaculately attired.

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The *Modernity* of *Ephemera* distinguishes it, too. Critical and scholarly confusion tends to place Yeats in a mélange of different, uncomfortable positions as regards literary Modernity. Yeats is either (hesitantly, tentatively) the first true literary Modernist, or an Edwardian-cum-late Romantic. The elements of *Ephemera* which make it extraordinary, and a hinge to *perfection*— a tautened sense of physiological tension (dynamism), and a sense, also, of a new, streamlined approach to sonority in the English language, wherein free-verse can resonant or shudder as convincingly as end-rhymed material— subsist. Yet there is also, built into *Ephemera*, and adumbrating the entire twentieth century which followed from it, a sense which scholars might tend to miss, of the *cinematic*. The fractures and abrasions built into *Ephemera* mirror the fractures and abrasions built into cinematic expression, shot (or succession of shots) by shot (or succession of shots). This, complete with dialogue without end-rhyme consigning it to the dust-bin of the Mannered, the effete. *Ephemera* reads (or views) as, among other things, a short film:

The woods were round them, and the yellow leaves
fell like faint meteors in the gloom, and once
a rabbit, old and lame, limped down the path;
Autumn was over him: and now they stood
on the lone border of the lake once more:
turning, he saw that she had thrust dead leaves,
gathered in silence, dewy as her eyes,
in bosom and hair.

Real, live action, in real time, followed camera-style. That sense of prescience in *Ephemera*, which broadens the significations out of its Modernity past usual Modern parameters (parts rather than wholes, formal fractures rather than seamlessness, collage-like impulses), takes and electrifies its sense of constructed-ness with a sense of change, dynamism, vitality. In other words, this reading of Yeats says that he, at his most perfect, is triumphantly Modern. Picture-ism in the *Prelude*, especially the more memorable encounters, happens yet (blank verse not having to be a deterrent) with one-

ended dynamism. In other words, Wordsworth has a dynamic reaction to something static. The *Prelude* suffers massively from the absence of the precise, perfected dynamic tension which electrifies, makes cinematic (anticipatory) *Ephemera*. Moreover, dialogue cannot be electrically charged in the *Prelude*, because there is none. Yeats configured as a late Romantic does a disservice to the idea that fracturing, in Modernity, can in fact take the form of internal *electrification* (incandescence) of elements. The jaggedness of the text is then an embedded sense that it cannot stay still within itself. The text *moves*.

Electrification creates confusion. Those who might want to dismiss *Ephemera* on account of its brevity, in defense of a twentieth century talisman like *The Waste Land*, are missing the point. The nature of *Ephemera's* twenty-six lines renders *The Waste Land*, like *Prelude*, at least a semi-moot point, owing to Eliot's caddishness, boorishness, and lack of dynamic integrity. By dynamic integrity, I mean that there are no sequences in *The Waste Land* tautened around physiological dynamism, to compare with *Ephemera*. *The Waste Land* describes itself perfectly— it does not *move*. With Wordsworth on one side and **Eliot** on the other, Yeats is the wavelength frequency most attuned to what happened in art in the twentieth century which was worth noting. The sense that Modernity was one big *move*— from the wholesome to the unholy, the sanctified to the irreligious, belief to irony— is anticipated by *Ephemera* having game live action, real time, camera-style. Eliot described himself as, in the context of *The Waste Land*, *rhythmically grumbling*; Yeats does more than that. Cinema follows from Modernism as an ancillary channel, not respecting wholes, showing what they care to show, nothing less, nothing more. Why cinema is often credited with more vitality than literature in the twentieth century is that the basic principles, *magnetism* and *fascination*, are not attended to by Modernist literature to right way. If Yeats emerges, without a sense of the hesitant or the tentative, as the most advanced (whole, entire) Modernist voice, it is because his willingness to include action in poetry, leading to a perceptive response (magnetized, fascinated, led in productive circles), is more convincing in the twenty-first century than what has already been posited. The stasis of Eliot, as the most likely alternative, is signifying.

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Connecting *Ephemera* with anything after Modernism (but before what I call Neo-Romanticism) is a strain. The chiasmus between *Ephemera* and the cinema moves the piece hesitantly, delicately towards post-modernity. But the deep-seated pathos, elegiac tone, and straightforward, linear narrativity of *Ephemera* (linear narrativity not precluding innovation on other formal and thematic levels) all chafe against the sardonic, ironic, corrosive, and yet ultimately heartless heart of post-modernity. Indeed, putting *Ephemera* on the hot-seat next to ordained post-modern products is a pointless exercise. With *Prelude* and *The Waste Land* there is a point; by *The Emperor of Ice Cream* (as illustrative), there is none. Not to mention other American junk-heaps like Black Mountain and San Francisco Renaissance. Let's skip, if we shall, to the Aughts in America, and the beginning of more action (*live* action) more germane. I have, in a manner of speaking, picked on the many ladies of the Aughts (American stripe) to develop a new mold or prototype they all happen to fit. There she stands before us, if you will: the *Creatrix*. As I have adumbrated the Creatrix-as-construct, and the entire formulation as a subset of Neo-Romanticism, the Creatrix feeds, as post-modernity did not (neither do multi-culturalism and academic feminism), on narratives of form and passion. Narratives meaning stories represented in a discernible way. Form and passion being self-explanatory. An interesting narrative, as in *Ephemera*, is then accredited with a sense of innovation. Forms rendered interestingly, also innovation. Entropy into incomprehensibility, nothing. Formless forays into the obviously anti-aesthetic, also nothing.

So, about this *live action* I've been promising. The locale happens, interestingly, to be New England, and the name of the poetess is **Rebecca Hilliker**. Let's take a look at *Catch*, and discern if we might how conventional textual tactics can be made to serve innovative ends:

The wind turns the water into an animal
and the boat rides the back of swells,
bucking wetly.
My legs absorb the push and pull,
thinking only of the fish,
sleek and dripping on the line,

neon green parachute ballooning
from its mouth.

I arch my back
and the rod dives.
The fish lifts, slimy as an egg,
spinning like a ballerina
on a silver thread,
its marble eye mute,
fixed on white.

How many times
did you find this world,
blinded, terrified?
There are hands on you
and pliers in your mouth,
metallic, blood-washed.
How many times have you waited
for the water
while everything lurches around you,
brilliant white, like the inside
of a hospital, like the underbelly
of a dream, gasping
to break the surface
toward that cold & sudden light?

Like *Ephemera*, physiological tension or tautness makes the poem serve a visceral end of magnetism, fascination. It might also be said that magnetism and fascination in text are impossible without narrative to hook potentially engaged consciousness. This can be done with fulsome narrative, or what **Roland Barthes** refers to as *bits* of narrative; but the narrative sector must be filled in somehow. Why *Catch* creates an interesting chiasmus with *Ephemera*, is that in *Ephemera*, the sense of a tense, tautened physiology plays against a formal conceit: free-verse used to create aesthetic effects usually created by end-rhymes. In *Catch*, the tense, tautened physiology plays against a phenomenological fantasy, wherein the protagonist transubstantiates herself into animal form. A visual, rather than an aural, change. In *Ephemera*, an elegiac effect is created by two lovers parting ways, who stay discrete, do not meld. In *Catch*, a sense of disorientation or dementia is created (cinematic also, as in *The Fly*) by a lack of cognitive discretion. The protagonist has a sense of identification that brings the poem to an intense, incandescent, partially horrific crescendo. *Ephemera* remain genteel; *Catch* does not. The sense of live action that they share, shot by shot, succession by succession, connects both pieces to a textual continuum what brings texts to the brink of the sublime, when the sublime (as in Schopenhauer) is imposing, overwhelming, either gently so (Yeats) or luridly (Hilliker).

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The final wraparound of Yeats to 2025 is that there is no final wraparound. It is not for one critic, one artist to define a poet of Yeats' magnitude. It simply needs to be said that hidden in *Ephemera* is a passkey, heretofore overlooked, to a textual world now inhabitable at a high level. Why, say, twenty years ago, no one on the American landscape would have been interested, is that too many minds were focused on movements, and works-within-movements, that would be precluded from having long-term impact or potential. No one wanted to say, in Amer-Indie in 2005, that the emperor was wearing no clothes, in many then-prominent directions. In 2025, we are less coy. Time, as ever, is an avenger, taking spurious textual mountains and chopping them down. If you can say there is any redeeming value or noblesse oblige in holding down the fort for obvious nonsense and self-demolishing babble, it is only that the American academy at large, and the American literary establishment, is still afraid of the sense of classicism, imaginative expansiveness, and semantic interest which must inhere in poetry which could endure not only here, but from here to the Continent, as well. This is an ultimate question to reckon, which takes the bright beginning of *Jacket* in the Aughts and extends it indefinitely— when there is American poetry ambitious enough to go Continental in a major way, what route will it take to get

there? How long will the journey be?

And back to Yeats. Why the Yeats version, as this critic sees it, of Modernism— not afraid to employ narrative to generate magnetism and fascination, but also able to innovate towards revelations not just of visceral urgency and symbolic heft but of gracefulness, beauty, *perfection*— deserves its place next to other narratives of Modernism and the Modern, is that too much other Modern work is, however innovative, too imperfect. Anti-aesthetic. Banal. Suggestive to too many writers that the emperor is wearing no clothes, and that the avant-garde in America is compelled to bow down to false idols. That this is a clarion call to conservatism, or to embrace conservatism, is a true *bete noir* in the mix. That we withstand less and less being offered under pretenses of innovation, under the threat that the impulse towards wholesomeness, aesthetic well-roundedness, and the pursuit of a beauty itself is a *conservative* impulse— oh what a *scarecrow* it is! Yeats and *Ephemera* beckon from a place wherein things are what they are. The *major* is really the *major*, and not secretly something else, and the minor, the reductive, the *untalented*, generates no idols to bow down before. All this is Neo-Romantic rhetoric. The way-station that was *post-avant* served its purpose twenty years ago— to demonstrate an abrasion, a rupture, against the Amer-Indie status quo. Now, the sense that Yeats may be the Mod of choice for Neo-Romanticism can move an enterprise forward which wants to involve, not only England and Australia like *Jacket*, but France and Germany, too. To offer our wares in the land of **Kant**, particularly, is to *get real* on a new level.

On the Possibilities of Multi-Media Readings

(2010)

In 2004 and 2005, a group of young artists who called themselves the **Philly Free School** staged a series of performances at the **Highwire Gallery**, in the now-demolished Gilbert Building on Cherry Street, Philadelphia. The stated goal of these performances was "multi-media": as such, they involved poetry, music, fiction, films, and different hybrid/mutant versions of these. What I want to address, specifically, is the poetry aspect of these performances. These seem relevant to me now because multi-media presentations of poetry are, to many, significantly more interesting than standard poetry readings, which are (I would argue) an impoverished form of public expression. What constitutes the impoverishment of poetry readings as public art events? Let's put the question in different terms: what does a poetry reading offer an audience?

An audience at a standard poetry reading is offered an anti-spectacle— a single man or woman, reading from sheets or a book, often looking down at this book while intermittently gazing up at his or her audience. Why look at something or someone static, and (for the most part) inexpressive? This is the first level of impoverishment. Then, as to the contents of poems read in a public context: are most poems compelling enough, as works of literature, to merit public airing? The truth is that most serious poems do not read that well out loud— poems (good ones) contain enormous amounts of compressed data, which necessitates slow, ocular engagement. Lines that need to be read three or four times to be properly processed pass with such rapidity, in a reading context, that they might as well be Greek as English. Moreover, attendees have two options— to make an earnest attempt to understand things instantly, or to drift off into reverie. The latter has consistently been my choice (and I have, fortunately or unfortunately, sat through dozens of readings).

But the Philly Free School artists (of which I was one) started from the presupposition that poetry could be mixed with **Artaud**; that public poetry is, in fact, better as a side-dish than as a main course; and that the possibilities of "spectacles" were (and remain) more exciting than more conventional poetry contexts. As such, the Philly Free School shows (which were well-attended but received little media coverage) presented, in general, little in the way of conventional poetry performances; poetry was mixed with video and music to create novel effects. I was proud to contribute to these performances, because they had not only young energies but principles behind them. While I would not deny that results were mixed (some ideas came off, some did not), I have yet to see another concentrated attempt to make poetry multi-media in a public forum. We were using artful language as *texture*, the way a painter might use brushstrokes, and an inquiry into this usage (language-as-texture) revealed untapped possibilities as regards making poetry interesting to audiences, who may or may not find poetry interesting to begin with.

When language is used as texture, as a constituent part of a spectacle that also includes sound and images, the audience (ideally) feels itself immersed or engulfed in a dynamic collage; as such, this kind of performance is an extension of the Modernist ethos. Fractured things can be more compelling than wholes; this was one tenet that motivated **Pound**, **Eliot**, and the rest. For an audience, sitting in a darkened room (and the Highwire offered two main spaces, a conventional gallery space and a warehouse space), this sense of brokenness could be interpreted many ways, but the essential thing for us was to present something that was dynamic, rather than static. The most elaborate of these presentations involved music, images, and poetry at once; while it would be reasonable to question whether the total effect was bombastic or not, the responses we received encouraged us to believe that what we were doing was significantly more exciting than an average poetry performance. Live poetry, I would argue, only works as texture to begin with; it is in the mix of things that live poetry comes alive. In the specific performances that I was personally involved with, I did, in fact, read entire poems; if I had it to do over again, I would not. It would have been substantially more appropriate to read fragments or even to improvise. The video collages were put together from foreign movies, Internet, music video, and photography bits. The musical elements alone were entirely improvised. Although I am proud of what the Philly Free School accomplished, it was merely a beginning. Thinking about it now, we could have

been much more rigorous. Our ideas of spectacle were naïve, and needed development.

What would a completely successful poetry spectacle, in the Artaudian sense, look like? Artaud, of course, became famous for his idea/ideal of the **Theater of Cruelty**; a spectacle that confronts an audience with its own mortality, in an unflinching, persistent way. What kind of poetry fragments could add, textually, to such a spectacle? It seems to me that the poetry would have to be written specifically in conjunction with, specifically for, the music and the images. They would have to function, in other words, *dramatically*, as carriers of a certain kind of drama, just as dialogue in a theater production does. What can poetry contribute that mere dialogue cannot? Poetry has in its arsenal a capacity for incantatory power that dialogue does not; an ability to build, to create rhythms, melodies, and cadences that dialogue cannot. Anaphora is one method by which this kind of fragment could work; rhyme is another. This is texture that creates stimulation; with other elements, the potentiality for genuine spectacle, cohesive spectacle (rather than naïve, haphazard spectacle) arises. As to what the spectacle addresses, there is no real limitation, other than the impulse to compel attention, hold it, and overwhelm at once. Certainly the apocalyptic conflicts in the Middle East, our flagging domestic economy, and the status of the environment are all fertile (pardon my irony) ground.

Then, there are things standing in the way of this kind of spectacle: time and budgets are big ones. Many poets just skirt insolvency; serious spectacle (unfortunately) often involves serious funds. The Philly Free School were lucky with this, more so than we realized; the Highwire let us use the space for free (though they took a cut of the door). But to come up with ample space, time, and funds is a real challenge, which cannot be solved overnight. It may come down to a collective, like the Philly Free School, to make this happen, if it does ever happen. To my mind, it would be a tragedy if it does not. There are, in general, too few poetry readings that have any capacity to stimulate, and too many that wind up being “snooze-fests.” The irony, for one working in an experimental context, is that avant-garde poetry readings tend to be even more boring than mainstream ones— abstruse poetry out loud, which shuns narrative, is more difficult to follow, and often registers as little better than gibberish. But I will simply say, for myself, that the desire to create a genuine spectacle with poetry has not perished, and I hope other kindred spirits are “waiting in the wings.”

Something Solid: Apologia

(2022-2026)

Something Solid, unlike *Apparition Poems*, is a book which knows its place. The God-forsaken violence of the poems strung in numbers is replaced by the textual sangfroid of consolidation with the core values which render poetry useful for most literary landscapes— incidents and situations chosen for interrogation, involving the poet in memory, sensuality, and the formality of the traditional sonnet (and newfangled **double sonnet**, twenty-eight lines). It represents a downward curve, as it were, into these topos, rather than an upward curve into serious philosophical discourse. What would make the book more than a curiosity (or, perhaps, anti-curiosity) to such discourse, is a **Barthes-ian** acknowledgement of a basic literary principle which philosophy finds distasteful, but which nonetheless has and will always dictate individual literary economies— we tend to read and re-read what we find pleasurable to read and re-read. The pleasure principle inhering in texts and textuality may dictate that *Something Solid*, despite its not being angled in a strictly original way, will be read and re-read with more pleasure and avidity than *Apparition Poems*, which most, including discursive minds, may choose to respect from a distance. The version of poetic memory explored here has as its ensign an engagement with two periods in time, one place specific— the Nineties, and Aughts Philadelphia. Built into the book's willfully conventional dynamic, is the imposition, on these periods, of an aura of romantic chaos, of the possibility of the poet's consciousness, in medias res in the appointed zeitgeists, conflating internal with external vicissitudes, so that the book resonates as both completely personal and ripe for universalization. The poet stands within the text and its dramas, a self-conscious synecdoche. The narrative-thematic context is semi-autobiography.

Where sensuality is taken in the text is to a locale configured to purify and transcendentalize its manifestation into an emergence of dramatic, imaginative and tactile reality. Bodies are not seen as real but hyperreal; the carnal acts as a portal into its own effacement, into the larger existence of Eros as an idea and ideal to mystify the objective-discursive. Also, Eros subsists to express the effacement of objectivity into immediacy, drama, and the aesthetic establishing its own, rightful claim on aestheticized language, in as ideal form as the text and the poet's talent will allow. Imagination in the text establishes its own body— possibilities glimpsed, starting from sense. *Undulant*, an early standout from the text, performs this task— layering sensual and imaginative data, the tactile over and under the imaginative, so as to solidify, both pleasure in the text for capable readers, immersion in time-zone or zeitgeist awareness, and formal innovation for what peregrinations can be compressed into fourteen lines. This ambitious task subsists past the manner of **Keats** and **Wordsworth**, in their respective sonnets, into a **Neo-Romanticism** (the presumed aegis under which the text falls) of all these conflated elements, coalescing in simultaneity. Not philosophy, but not simple either. *Frequencies* begins from more sophisticated ground— the meta-aesthetic— one artist addressing another. Then, the poet's imagination somersaults into an assaying of the imagination of the Other. That the meta-aesthetic manifests alongside a raw revelation of carnality makes *Frequencies* ring out or emanate, with a Manneristic, perhaps, sense of exaggeration, on double, triple, and quadruple levels. As is not irrelevant, both *Frequencies* and *Undulant* are darkly colored, with under and overtones of chaos and violence. They do have a way of echoing *Apparition Poems*. Eros is not dulcet here but foreboding, edgy. Textual interrogation reveals no perceived placidity. The language knows its place, is polished; the represented situations are raw.

The text's extensive immersion in visual art, through the prominent placement in the text of **Mary Evelyn Harju**, **Abby Heller-Burnham**, and **Jenny Kanzler**, tilts the text towards a perpetual sense of ekphrasis, as an owned level. This level achieves a status of semi-dominance, developed along semi-dominant lines. The semi-dominance of a travelogue sensibility, from Philadelphia to New Hampshire to Montreal to Chicago, is also developed in tandem. The grounded quality of the text, against *Apparition Poems*, answers perversion with exuberance, a haunted house with an eternal salon, down to a series of **Creatrix** muses who imbue the text, as has been said, with ekphrastic intention. This coloring or imbuing culminates in *Starlight I* and *II*, a miniaturized dialectic that takes (as *Equations* does not, exactly) the mysticism of romance and intoxication and confers judgement or an answer on the pursual of such, amid darker ("raw") material. The objective is thus established as one (Neo-Romantic) aegis for

the subjective to sit under, in a text which takes its stripes both from the cognitive and the intuitive.

The sonnet, as a poetic form, is traditionally an enemy of philosophy. Brevity and compression of data are both adversarial to the development of discourse and discursive contexts. Why the sonnet here was chosen and set into dynamic motion was to undo preconceptions regarding what the sonnet's possibilities are, in practice, if hinged to a solidly placed premise. For the book, the poet invented a form— what he calls a *double sonnet*— one sonnet atop another, as a twenty-eight line poem, rather than a fourteen line poem. Precisely half the poems in *Something Solid* are double sonnets. The expectation horizon of twenty-eight lines is, or can be construed to be, radically dissimilar to the original mere fourteen. In twenty-eight lines, the *little song*, angled against intellectual expansiveness, takes on a new stripe as a vessel or vehicle more pliant, more nimble, more about widening parameters so that memory, sensuality, and drama, have a more adequate stage to perform, do their tricks on. The stage should then be both adequately lit, and adequately built to support their weight. Yet, the precision of the form— twenty-eight lines— renders some compression necessary, so that the traditional sonnet geist of willing confinement, enforced brevity, and the phenomenological tension which ensues, for both poet and reader, still stakes a claim and imposes that poetry remains poetry.

For *Something Solid* to transcend the merely tautological— poetry being poetry, long-established tropes within poetry digging in their respective heels to reestablish their subsistence and contemporary relevance— the combination of elements which inhere in the text must gather themselves together and travel, as if thrown with substantial velocity, to a unique gestalt locale. The locale, as a congeries of all its component parts, is crystallized, in miniaturized form, in *Undulant*, and in more representatively newfangled form in *Frequencies*— the charm, sense of transgression or danger (chaos and violence) thwarted, neutralized, or at least assimilated, and *frissons* built into a life, unconventional amidst all the conventionality, consecrated against bourgeois pursuits. The poet is not domesticated. Rather, in his travels, the pursuit is for the richness of flight, and the phenomenology of flight, travel, as an end in itself. The poet, as an arrow flying through spaces at any moment enchanted or damned, is in love with the very principle of dynamism perpetuating itself. What gravitas is expressed, what objectivity is reached for, has to do with an understanding reached, through the composition of the book, what human life can offer to this form of consciousness, which craves a mien of the unsettled. Here's how motion or dynamism is achieved, here's how pieces may fall around it. The rogue poet is no one new, to be sure. This rogue poet is not attempting to be new, even if he is, often, inhabiting a new form. What he wants is a new kind of textual voyage, for himself, to mirror and ricochet against, and thus enhance, his fleshly, and cognitive, voyages.

Metaphysics of the Double Sonnet

(2022-2026)

The metaphysics of the fourteen-line sonnet are not particularly complex ones. Beneath the structural surface of meter, and prosody in general, the fourteen line sonnet both embodies, and represents, a wave on the ocean, and a manifestation of a wave-on-the-ocean dynamic. An impulsive complex in the poet's brain, mostly made, as tradition has defined it, of affective rather than intellectual material, coalesces to hurl itself into brief gestalt shape, as it crashes down in the produced "little song." A sonnet sequence, like *Astrophil and Stella*, takes the wave-on-the-ocean principle and makes of it a catalog of affective consciousness, an imaginative diary of moods. **Shakespeare**, **Donne**, **Keats**, **Milton**, **Wordsworth**, even, later, **Edna St. Vincent Millay**— all are voices employing the sonnet to index a unique form of sensation— first, the mood (lunar, tidal), then, the will-to-text embedded in the mood, encompassing the reach back to other indexes, other catalogues (especially Keats to Wordsworth and Shakespeare), gaining heft from evidenced histories, before giving way to actual liquidity, in the collision of text produced into precise fourteen line containers. Compression and brevity then seal the simplicity of a literary history which has a unique charm and charisma. This, because when executed skillfully, the wave-on-the-ocean effect creates a correlative sensation in receptive readers, who feel themselves buoyed up, then down again (to more ocean, or the shore), all with a sense of gracefulness and gratefulness that the poet has again moved a bit of water, which can be imagined as a synecdoche for the entire ocean of texts, or books. If the fourteen-line sonnet is a refutation of the discursive, it also dually offers itself to humanize literature, and, implicitly, discourse, with a purification of one kind of (affective) form or essence, against the excesses of the unlimited, of the boundlessness of possible cognitions, built into discourse, which purify discursive possibility in turn.

The invention of a genuine literary form is rare. What appears in the book *Something Solid*, and which I call a *double sonnet*— a twenty-eight line poem, one fourteen line sonnet on top of another— must, of necessity, manifest a more complex metaphysic. A wave-on-the-ocean, if it were merely to multiply into two waves on the ocean (two moods), would be redundant. Rather, what a double sonnet is attempting to accomplish is a larger ocean wave (still compressed, still brief), capable of moving in the direction of, even if not able to fully manifest, discourse, and the discursive or intellectual. The wave is built to rise higher, with greater authority, into the air, so that affect can reach around for other tools of the trade or craft— imaginative creativity (metaphor), prosodic effects, perspective shifts, bits of dialogue— and employ them in a redistribution of literary resources, so that the sonnet may take new ground. Now, the sonnet's sense of completion, and the correlative sensation of completion in readers, hinges to something new— a sense, in the middle of the double sonnet, of sitting on the crest of the wave for a few moments, opening up whatever view fits the poem's intentions and impulses. This means that, by the time the wave exhausts itself, the experience does not have to suggest, when interrogated, a paucity of interesting ideas. Rather, interrogation of the double sonnet is designed to reveal a slow-motion version of the original model, so that the reader can assimilate, interrogate, and re-imagine data as the poem itself is experienced, in real time. The metaphysics of the fourteen-line sonnet are then fruitfully complicated, and a unique, complex literary metaphysic is engendered.

To synthesize: are there reasons to prefer the original model? Yes— those who enjoy the game of extreme brevity, of seeing how much data can be compressed into a small space, how much velocity packed into a quick ride, may cling to possibilities inhering in fourteen lines. This extends, also, into the poetry crowd who fetishize tactility, materiality in general, the anti-cognitive. It is not just the original sonnet that holds up the proverbial cross to discourse; some forms of poetry, as an entire enterprise, do an analogous task. Keats, here, is an exemplar. What poetry represents a commercial pursuit follows this predilection through. For those otherwise attuned, who relish the idea and ideal that poetry become attendant upon developed intelligence, the double sonnet should at least be an entity commensurate with the original model. By taking games cramped by tininess, like the *volta*, as initiated in Renaissance Italy (as, at the conclusion of the octave or the beginning of the sestet, a turn or twist is added to the poem thematically, as a point of emphasis), or Shakesperean or **Petrarchan** rhyme schemes, and replacing them with freedom to establish novel games, or just to develop whatever topoi are at hand, the double sonnet opens up a region of pure, unmolested literary promise: the strengthened wave, or

the slow, sure wave (slow, sure mood), that can stand being freighted with the armatures and artilleries of the new century, and its array of possibilities. **Neo-Romanticism** manifest.

Acknowledgements

*The Argotist Online (*including *Disturb the Universe*, first, second e-book edition*):*

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